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INTRODUCING MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY TO MOLISE, 1977-1980

RICHARD HODGES

Medieval archaeology was yet to lose its innocence in the later 1970s in southern Italy. It was defined by art and architectural studies on the one hand, and on the other by a small but important group of limited research excavations that had produced stratified finds. Research by this time in north-west Europe made it seem highly likely that studies dependent upon art and architectural sources needed to be treated with caution (Hodges 1976). Subsequent research in southern Italy has confirmed that this cautiousness was prudent. David Whitehouse (1966, 1969), in particular, had established some important benchmarks for early and high medieval ceramics. Taken together with John Hayes's ground-breaking book on Late Roman Pottery (1972), there were, therefore, the bare bones of potentially identifying sites that spanned the period AD 500-1000. These ceramics permitted a debate to take shape about the origins of hilltop villages. The latest Roman and the first medieval contexts could be adequately dated. Yet, given the insubstantial nature of the archaeology, historians such as Pierre Toubert (1973) had established a paradigm that village formation was a process amply documented by the charters of the age that occurred in the 10th century. This was the process of *incastellamento*. As in north-west Europe, this left a question mark hanging over the intervening period between the final Roman sites and the new villages. In Molise, a region dominated by hilltop villages today, there seemed great scope to analyze this issue.

1. The Biferno Valley Project: 1977-1979

It was this ceramic framework that was in my mind as I joined Graeme Barker in September 1977 to visit sites in the Biferno Valley. Barker was surveying sites between the Adriatic Sea port of Termoli and the small, walled Roman town of *Saepinum* in the shadow of the Matese mountains (Barker 1996). He had collected everything in the accessible ploughed fields, and a tiny fraction of sherds – mostly very abraded - could be reasonably ascribed to the early, high or late Middle Ages. Indeed the key, it seemed to me, was getting a foothold on the ceramic sequence defined by Whitehouse: first, African Redslip wares; second, broad-line red-painted ware; third, narrow-line red-painted wares; fourth *proto-maiolica* (and other 13th- to 15th-century glazed) tablewares.

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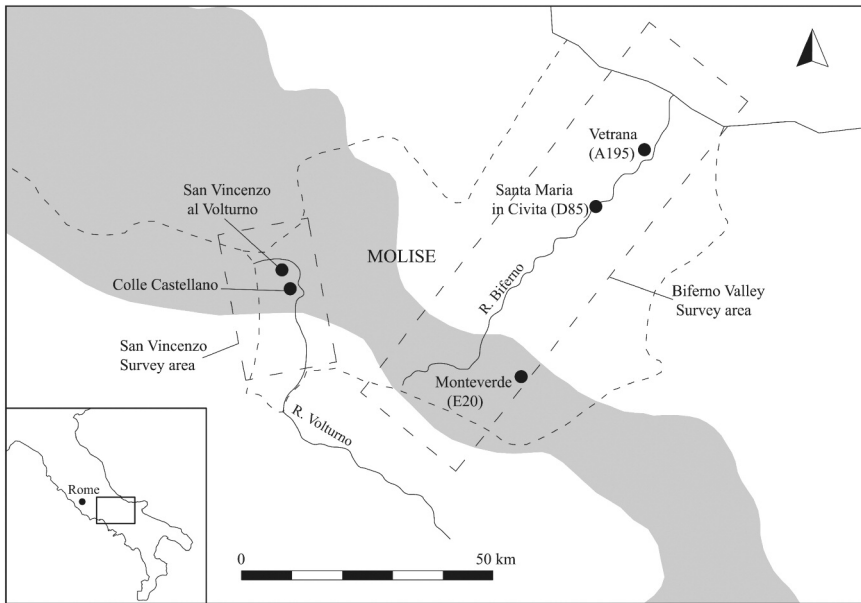
Fig. 1. The Location of the sites mentioned in the text.

Two incidents on our day-long drive down the valley set the tone for our future research, and then my subsequent sojourn in north-west Molise at San Vincenzo al Volturno. First, Graeme Barker pointed out a seemingly fortified hilltop that his team had visited believing it to be pre-Roman. Catalogued as site D85 (but called Santa Maria in Civita) (Hodges, Barker, Wade 1980), this saddle-backed hill overlooking an ancient bridging-point over the Biferno near Guardialfiera, had what he described as 'red stripy ware'. Graeme's description, given that he was not familiar with broad-line red-painted ware, turned out to be extraordinarily precise. Back at his depot, on seeing the surface collection, I realized at once that this was the early medieval type Whitehouse had identified principally in Apulia. Later wares in the form of finer narrow-line red-painted and glazed wares were absent. Only coarse ware open vessels accompanied the small collection. In sum, D85 was an 8th- or 9th-century hilltop site. Plainly we needed to excavate to define whether it was an early version of a hilltop village, thereby establishing a benchmark for the origins of this settlement form in this area of the Principality of *Beneventum*. The second incident was no less important. Studying the IGM maps with Peter Taylor, the project's post-medieval historian/anthropologist, it was evident that many 'lost' villages appeared in the toponyms of the valley. Defining this more closely, therefore, was essential. So, I invited Chris Wickham to review these names in the light of the medieval
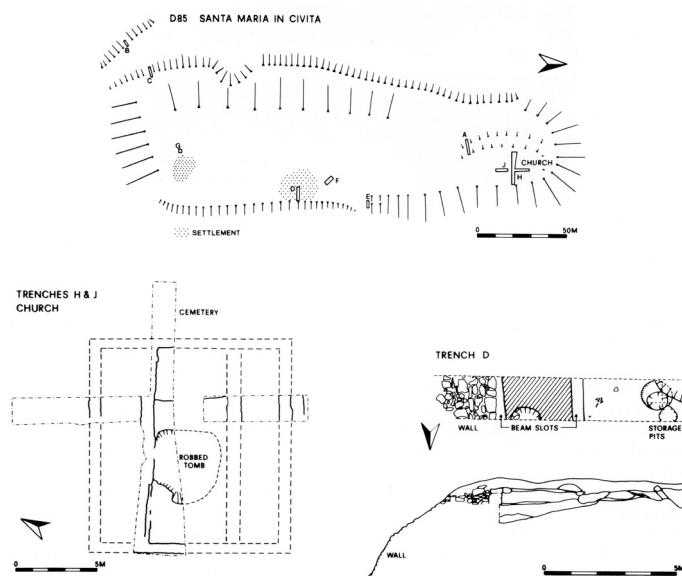
Fig. 2. The excavations at D85, Santa Maria in Civita.

sources. The result – as Chris had shown in South Etruria – was a wealth of information about potential rural settlements that needed to be checked on the ground (Wickham 1978). Ceramics and toponyms were most readily congruent at the castles and churches in the Biferno valley. So, we visited all the known sites, seeking out sections in the castles where potsherds could be found in context – such as thin-lined red-painted wares in the 12th- to 13th-century castle above Boiano, and field-walking around the isolated churches that evidently once stood within inhabited villages. These methods certainly helped to build a framework. But thanks to the encouragement of the *soprintendente*, Bruno d'Agostino, we were able to refine the outline settlement sequence by undertaking an excavation at D85 (Santa Maria in Civita) in 1978, and systematic surveys of the villages of A195 (*Vetrana*) near Guglionesi, and E20 Monteverde, close to Campobasso.

Developing the strategy to define the settlement sequence was helped by Graeme Barker's good relationship with the *Soprintendenza*. Possibly diffidence towards medieval archaeology also helped. At D85, in three weeks in August 1978, we first carried out a geophysical survey, then we systematically plotted all the ceramics, tiles and other surface debris, following Redman's multistage strategy (Redman 1973), then we 'sampled' in small trenches the principal visible features as well as those highlighted by the

geophysical and surface surveys. We were trenching as time (18 days of digging) precluded any larger excavations. As a result, we defined the scale of the settlement: an occupation area against a major perimeter wall, with remains of post-built structures, and associated grain silos full with carbonized processed cereals; and the remains of a small church occupying the most prominent top of the saddle-backed hill. I recall the enthusiasm of d'Agostino with great pleasure; he was genuinely pleased to see such a range of remains of an entirely unknown ('broad-line red-painted pottery' period) era. In retrospect, I was extremely lucky to have the support of Graeme Barker and Chris Wickham for such an unusual approach, and to have made the most of it. Graeme placed great emphasis upon understanding the silo's cereal contents, organizing a major campaign of froth-flotation. Chris put much effort into comprehending the settlement pattern, given the unexpected and largely undocumented discovery of what turned out to be a 9th-century site. As it happened, with time we changed our minds about it, first believing D85 to be a hilltop village, then concluding that it was a Beneventan Lombard *élite* settlement overlooking a key bridging-point over the river Biferno[1]. Those three weeks illuminated a hitherto unknown era of Molise in a truly extraordinary way, a harbinger of my experience at San Vincenzo al Volturno in north-west Molise.

We surveyed two other villages: *Vetrana*, another saddle-backed hill identified as A195 in the field survey, possessed an entirely different range of ceramics but no *proto-maiolica*, and E20/Monteverde – one of many later medieval villages, with stone-built structures and associated later medieval glazed wares including *proto-maiolica*. A195, like D85, overlooked the Biferno; Chris Wickham soon identified it as the lost village of *Vetrana*. This village - *super ipse fluvio Biferno* - was first mentioned in 1049-59 when it was given to S. Maria di Tremeti (Hodges, Wickham 1981, p. 499). In early September 1979 we made a systematic intra-site survey of the hill. Again like D85, it has a prominent knoll on which, I surmised, a church was located. Unlike D85, though, apart from the absence of broad-line red-painted wares, there was an intensive scatter in the plough soil, ranging along the two sides of the promontory. This looked like a typical *castellum* founded in the 10th century that had failed before or during the 14th century, perhaps because it was unable to survive in such close proximity to the major hilltop village hereabouts, Guglionesi[2]. Monteverde, by contrast, was overgrown, and the ceramics were only found in abraded sections. We managed in 1978 to make a schematic plan depicting the topography of the deserted village. Apart from a church, this village comprised lines of small residential (peasant) dwellings

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[1] HODGES, BARKER, WADE 1980; VAN DER VEEN 1985; HODGES, WICKHAM 1995; BOWES, HODGES 2002.

[2] HODGES 1979; HODGES, WICKHAM 1981, HODGES, WICKHAM 1995.

either side of an obvious rock-cut street. There were also traces of a possible piazza. The property of Santa Maria in Guglieto, in form, Monteverde resembled numerous small villages in the Biferno valley that we visited, but did not publish. These sites, I suspect, remain unknown and unprotected to this day; the diffidence towards medieval archaeology given the celebrated status of Molise's churches and villages is bafflingly disappointing.

2. San Vincenzo al Volturno 1979-80

This diffidence led me to San Vincenzo al Volturno on a bucolic Sunday in early September 1979. Bruno d'Agostino had given me permission to make the intra-site survey of *Vetrana*, jokingly making the condition that I visited San Vincenzo and consider how to excavate at the 'crypt of San Lorenzo'. It was not known as San Vincenzo then, but instead, as the 12th-century *Chronicon Vulturnense* describes a 9th-century San Lorenzo *in Insula* as one of San Vincenzo al Volturno's churches, and given the fine panel depicting the martyrdom of San Lorenzo in the crypt paintings, it appeared simplest to call it this. Driving there I did not appreciate the extraordinary history of this monastery; I assumed it was a church and crypt, a place of regional importance. Upon arriving, in all honesty, I was struck by the exquisite beauty of the place, a secret beside a stream, the river Volturno, overshadowed by the towering Mainarde Mountains. Such was the secret that my companions and I were unable to find the celebrated 9th-century crypt. Instead, I encountered an old peasant in front of the New Abbey (restored by Don Angelo Pantoni in the 1960s). Toothless, he handed over a bunch of keys and muttered incomprehensible directions. We searched in vain and eventually drove to the village above, Castel San Vincenzo, and entered the great baroque church overlooking the deserted village square. Sparrows flew in and out as we pursued our odyssey without luck. Exiting, a *carabiniere* in his jeep roared up, ordered me in, hustled me into the *caserma* and, in German, insisted I was a terrorist – I was then fair haired and drove a VW! It took some time to persuade him I was looking for the crypt of San Lorenzo and eventually he gave me the directions.

'San Lorenzo' was completely overgrown, but pushing through the bushes, we found the traces of deep irregular trenches in the area to the south, where evidently another building lay contiguous with San Lorenzo. It was situated in the darkened lea of the hill (Colle della Torre) beside the Volturno, at the far side of a simple, fragile bridge that appeared to have some antiquity (the Ponte della Zingara). The crypt itself was housed in a new building (which later someone described as Saracenic). This building, constructed like the worst of the new village houses, was apparently part of a recent attempt at *valorizzazione* of the

Fig. 3. The 'Saracenic cover' over 'San Lorenzo' at San Vincenzo al Volturno.

crypt. Instead, notwithstanding the lack of maintenance, it stood out as a tasteless, architectural defiling of an otherwise beautiful tract of landscape. The door into the crypt was rusted and opened with difficulty. Inside, with the light of a bare bulb, strung up in a makeshift way, we immediately saw the paintings, before we became aware of the jumping spiders that launched themselves at us. Below, studying the familiar panels of frescoes, a film of green creeping up from the floor showed they were in urgent need of restoration.

We made notes on the visible buildings as well as the trenches. In sum, it appeared that a second apsed building lay alongside the crypt church. This apsed building, of which only a tiny portion was visible due to the undergrowth, was separated by a deep corridor. In the centre of the corridor was an irregular hole. Further holes were in the apsidal area, revealing deep deposits, and, finally, a shallow irregular trench had been excavated high above the exposed, well-made apse. Plainly, deep stratigraphy existed here with a real potential, being associated with the crypt and its tight chronological attribution to the abbacy of *Epyphanius* (824-42), to make an archaeological project that found an intersection between art, architecture and material culture.

These trenches, I later learnt were the work of Don Angelo Pantoni (see below) and were reported after a fashion in his *Le Chiese e gli Edifici del Monastero di San Vincenzo al Volturno* (1980). Otherwise, lines of strip vineyards ran away to the immediate south, while the terraced hillside boasted olives, but the ground around them had become engulfed in voluminous wild shrubs and brambles. Plainly, the place was abandoned, hence the difficulty I had had in finding it.

So, the stewardship of the premier medieval archaeological monument in Molise was less than commendable. San Vincenzo, despite its celebrated history had clearly been too far from the *Soprintendenza* at Campobasso to maintain the crypt and its associated monuments satisfactorily. Like the medieval

villages I had found in the Biferno Valley, notwithstanding its status as an artistic treasure, its upkeep fell behind that of Molise's Samnite and Roman sites. Excited by the archaeological potential, utterly naive about the conservation challenge, I accepted Bruno d'Agostino's kind offer to excavate, proposing in addition to make a field survey around the monastery. He concurred.

Precisely at this time I had been seeking to investigate a monastery, a place where those who made early medieval history lived. Having just completed *Dark Age Economics* (1982), it was apparent that the archaeology of monasteries was far behind the study of towns and villages – places of those 'denied history' in Eric R. Wolf's sense (1982). This was all the more obvious from the publication that year of Walter Horn and Ernest Born's magnificent three-volume study of the plan of St. Gall (1979). The extraordinarily lavish treatment of the plan distracted the reader from the purposeful but antiquarian analysis of the archaeology of early medieval monasteries. Much of this great book is 'vulgar history' in the sense that the material culture is so crudely and uncritically reviewed, following ethnic and other traditional historical approaches. Being part of the canon of early medieval architectural history, there was a tremendous incentive to apply anthropological archaeological techniques to a monastery and its territory, testing the relationships between the monkish community that made history and its dependent peasants who were denied a place in the contemporary texts.

I stopped at Luni to see Bryan Ward-Perkins and his ground-breaking excavations of the latest phases of the Roman town. He was a wonderful host, but over dinner questioned whether excavating a monastery was a wise move. Italian medieval archaeology, I recall him saying, was full of Marxists who despised church archaeology. Thirty years later, I think he was musing upon the likely reaction of people like Riccardo Francovich, whom he knew but I did not. Next I contacted Chris Wickham. He enthused. He had just completed an exhaustive re-examination following Mario Del Treppo's landmark paper (1954-55) of the *terra* of San Vincenzo al Volturno (Wickham 1985). Excavating at San Vincenzo and simultaneously following up our Biferno valley research design in the upper Volturno, given the rich charter evidence in the *Chronicon Vulturnense*, would be ground-breaking. Chris's eager support convinced me and I planned a campaign to begin in August 1980.

I have published a great deal about the excavations at San Vincenzo al Volturno and in the upper Volturno valley[3]. None of this could have been foreseen in August 1980. We assumed that the great monastery described in the *Chronicon Vulturnense* lay underneath the remains of the New Abbey, on the east side of the river Volturno. Angelo Pantoni's book

[3] See, for example, Hodges 1981, 1993, 1995, 1997; Hodges, Mitchell 1995; Mitchell, Hansen 2001; Bowes, Francis, Hodges 2006; Hodges, Leppard, Mitchell 2009.

(1980) was just published and took for granted that the present monastery had an uninterrupted history back to c.703. Certainly, the *Soprintendenza* assumed this, and permitted us to investigate the outlier, riverside churches ahead of mounting a new conservation programme with an accompanying new steel roof over the San Lorenzo. We worked in three groups: one team excavated the nave and narthex of the Crypt Church, soon discovering a bewildering stratigraphy scarcely below the shallow topsoil; a second team, concentrated upon the apsidal area immediately south of the crypt itself; a third team investigated the area, already subjected to a trenching, on the terrace immediately above the apse.

The three excavations almost immediately produced baffling discoveries. In the narthex of the Crypt Church were large block-built tombs. In the apse of what we christened the South Church, because it was immediately south of the Crypt Church, we followed an earlier irregular hole, discovering first a well-made surface, below which were deep deposits full of ceramics overlying an excellent floor and a painted altar. None of the ceramics corresponded to those found in the Biferno valley and I supposed that these were local early medieval types from the upper Volturno. In fact, these were Late Antique wares in a deep deposit, overlying a well-made 8th-century floor and a well-preserved if simple painted altar. The iconography of the altar, being so simple and rudimentary, clearly pre-dated the (well-studied) paintings ascribed to 824-42 in the adjacent crypt. My bewilderment was compounded by the discovery of a skeleton in the third trench with a beaded necklace that looked to be 6th-century in date. Nothing quite made sense. Don Angelo Pantoni visited and in his inimitably cheery way told me that I was digging in the wrong place! He was thoroughly bemused by the enthusiastic excavations being undertaken by Brits on his monastery. He quoted Shakespeare to assure me of the friendliness of his conviction that the monastery had been located where the present monastery was located. Fragments of inscription from Abbot Joshua's great abbey-church, San Vincenzo Maggiore, had been found re-used in the Romanesque pavements of the New Abbey by Pantoni himself. That said, he was intrigued and curious: he revealed that he had made the inchoate holes we had employed as our three starting-points. He had made others, and took me up over Colle della Torre to see the two rock-cut *arcosolia* above the cemetery occupying the overgrown olive groves. Higher still, penetrating the thick vegetation on the hilltop, he said there were more structures. I left him there with an unshaven monk and together they cleared the shrubs, to show me more remains of buildings when I returned later in the day. Pantoni knew Colle della Torre had some special significance, but it was to be another four years before he surrendered his hypothesis that the great Beneventan monastery lay beneath the New Abbey and instead was here, a 'Dark Age Pompeii' as he said, grinning, in his heavily accented English.

Giuseppe Basile was the first member of any institution to visit us. The *Soprintendenza* had charged him with restoring the crypt, and now I had added the newly discovered painted altar to his charge. He was helpful in describing how to protect the altar, and at the same time speculated on its date. Bruno d'Agostino came with his inspectors soon afterwards. The latter picked blackberries; Bruno looked at the potsherds from the excavations as well as those from the field survey that I started at that time. He was extremely helpful, picking out the prehistoric potsherds, then the classical ones, leaving me to make some sense of the rest in order to identify any early medieval material. None of us assumed that the excavations had pinpointed San Vincenzo al Volturno. Puzzlingly, these were two outlier churches, possibly two of the many monastic churches described in the *Chronicon Vulturnense*. Added to this, the field survey had found tile scatters in the dense lines of strip vineyards extending 200 m. or so south of the South Church, but no apparent early medieval remains (for example, no 'broad-line red-painted ware'). Instead, east of the river an extensive scatter of Republican and Imperial Roman sherds was found. To confound this absence of obvious archaeological indices of the monastery, on a daily basis the peasants working these fields stopped to inform us that a city had been here once, destroyed by the '*Saraceni*'. It was obvious that a major settlement was here but our preconceptions restrained us from identifying it accurately.

The field survey, though, was more straightforward. Armed with Chris Wickham's analysis of the *terra*, two teams surveyed many parts of the Rocchetta Plain and upper Volturno valley without discovering any obvious D85 or *Vetrana*-like places. So, guided by Chris Wickham, we began to visit places with toponyms that indicated some earlier, abandoned villages. In early September 1980 at Colle Castellano, south of Montaquila, we found a hilltop with plentiful and highly distinctive ceramics. This was essentially a Volturno version of D85 or *Vetrana*, a *castello* spanning the later 9th- to 12th-centuries; a precursor of the Norman foundation of Montaquila. Immediately we knew we had not found comparable sites in the field survey, or indeed any layers of this period at San Lorenzo (at San Vincenzo al Volturno). Armed with these sherds we then visited obvious deserted medieval villages, and within a few days had found the 'Colle Castellano wares' associated with later, *proto-maiolica* sherds, at Cerasuolo Vecchio, Porcina, and Filignano Alto - 'Le Mure' (cf. Bowes, Francis, Hodges 2006). Dispersed habitations, I quickly concluded, did not exist in the upper Volturno valley in the early middle ages, as they had not existed in the Biferno valley. But we ended the season truly puzzled by the lack of 'Colle Castellano' sherds at San Vincenzo. The village archaeology and the remains we had found so far at San Vincenzo represented two entirely separated worlds. David Whitehouse noted as much, examining the Late Antique wares from the excavations of the Crypt and South Churches. Without ex-
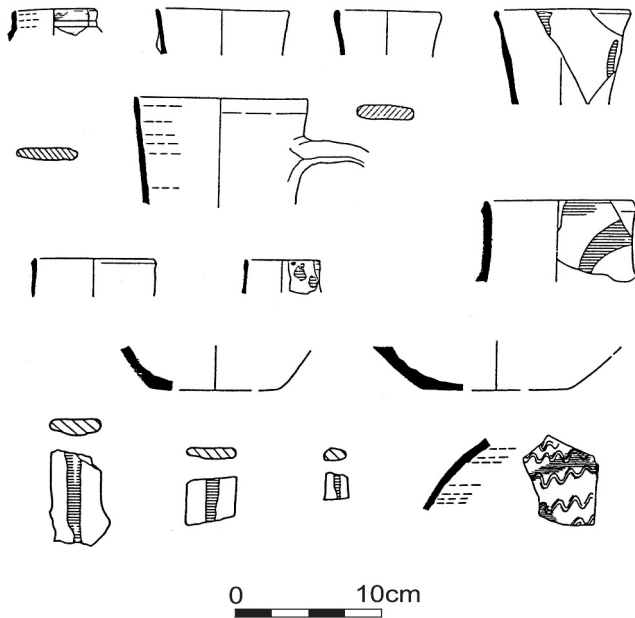
Fig. 4. Ninth-century red-painted wares from Colle Castellano.

pressing it, being helpful, encouraging and above all polite, I suspected that he thought I had selected the wrong place to dig at San Vincenzo, a place with such historical promise. Only in 1981 did we begin to comprehend the complexity of San Vincenzo's long history.

Two weeks later I was invited to Poppi in Tuscany to see the survey area where the late Don Spratt and Simon Stoddart were working. After two months without storms the weather changed and with heavy rains it was impossible to go out. The infectiously genial Don came up with a solution – I should meet Riccardo Francovich, and he telephoned telling Riccardo he should meet me. He arrived, a young vigorous man, aged well beyond his years, slightly bent, wearing a blue beret, and saluted us in broken English (he was taking English classes). Within minutes I described my work in Molise, hard on the heels of completing "Dark Age Economics". He listened, then with a passionate urgency decided I should follow him (in his blue Renault 4) back to his home in Antella, near Florence, where we might talk over the weekend. It was full immersion. For three years I had been an English medieval archaeologist in *terra incognita*, while unknown to me with huge energy Riccardo was defining a new discipline. When I left on the Sunday evening, exhausted by the extraordinary intensity of Riccardo's passion, he said I should come to Siena and we must collaborate on a project in Tuscany. I agreed, not least because Riccardo's stated need to expand his intellectual horizons along with his extraordinary friendliness and generosity, were im-

mediately palpable. Under his very particular, affectionate and volcanic tutelage, I began a course in Italian medieval archaeology that shaped the project at San Vincenzo al Volturno and led to our collaborative excavations at Montarrenti, near Siena (cfr. Cantini 2003; Francovich, Hodges 2003).

3. Conclusions

I was unbelievably fortunate. The medieval archaeology of Molise was entirely unknown and the *Soprintendenza* supported my innovative approaches to investigating it. In particular, Bruno d'Agostino altered the course of my life. I was fortunate too to collaborate with Graeme Barker and Chris Wickham, and to find willing counsel from David Whitehouse. Essentially, this was an English world, very different from that I soon discovered in Siena. Here, by contrast, in a small but humming, active laboratory like mine in the UK, was a world in which medieval archaeology was being defined in Italy, wherein Riccardo Francovich, in particular, was extending the envelop with extraordinary energy but meeting huge obstacles. Riccardo believed passionately in the work of the foreign missions; they brought new intellectual *animus* to Italian archaeology, he said. But, from my privileged and fortunate viewpoint, I regret that we had been so separated and independent. The foreign schools at this time tended to reify a separateness, almost a colonialism. Then, too, more pertinently, opportunities to undertake archaeological research in Italy were poorly mediated by the *Soprintendenza*, a bureaucracy that then needed and has never had a serious overhaul. Career opportunities for Italian students, as a result of this anachronistic national body, have been hugely restricted in comparison with other European countries. The comparison is all the more disturbing given the huge worldwide interest in Italian patrimony, especially its medieval material culture. Riccardo with herculean focus endeavoured to confront exactly this challenge, striving to emulate professional archaeological conditions in France, Spain and the United Kingdom. But in Molise, as the subsequent, often unpalatable history of San Vincenzo al Volturno illustrates, huge resources have been expended with profligacy, amazingly creating no sustainable career opportunities for young medieval archaeologists. For a *regione* now with an international profile thanks to this unique excavated site, to discover the overgrown monuments at San Vincenzo, the closed museum, the disregard for medieval archaeology is distasteful and more. Thirty years on, the *Soprintendenza* is little altered, and badly lacks the wisdom of Bruno d'Agostino. No-one can any longer explain this as a loss of innocence, so much as a sad failure to grasp a chance for young archaeologists, that thanks to Riccardo has lent Tuscany at least a special place in Italian medieval archaeology.

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