Encounters, Excavations and Argosies

Essays for Richard Hodges

edited by

John Moreland, John Mitchell and Bea Leal

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Cover illustration: Two eagles, dado in the crypt of Abbot Epyphanius, San Vincenzo al Volturno, c. 820 (Photo: Sarah Cocke)

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Bone plaque with hunting dog leaping over eye.
Butrint, Triconch Palace, c. AD 400. (© Butrint Foundation)

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Richard Hodges and Tuscany: from the pioneering excavations of the 80s to the ERC-Advanced nEU-Med Project

Giovanna Bianchi

Looking back in time

Richard Hodges' long relationship with Tuscany is closely connected to Riccardo Francovich, and to talk about it we must, of necessity, begin with their first meeting in 1981, which from the outset marked the beginning of an important professional relationship, as well as a personal one.

Hodges and Francovich met in the latter's home at Antella, a splendid place in the hills near Florence (Figure 1). At that time Francovich, seven years older than Hodges, was already a well-known scholar in Italy. After graduating in medieval history, he started to take an interest in archaeology, beginning at the time of his thesis on the castles of the Florentine countryside. In 1974, aged just 27, he founded the journal *Archeologia Medievale*, one of the most important steps in the formation of modern medieval archaeology in Italy. A few years later, when he was barely 30, the University of Siena appointed Francovich to one of the first chairs in Medieval Archaeology.

From that moment Siena emerged as the main study centre for medieval archaeology in Italy, with Francovich as the most important point of reference for the discipline. Francovich's passion for research was always accompanied by a great curiosity for what was going on outside the borders of Italy. Thus it was quite natural in 1981 for him to invite to his home at Antella, always open to Italian and foreign colleagues, this brilliant young English scholar who in that year had published his doctoral thesis, completed four years earlier at Southampton University, and who was then finishing one of his best-known books, *Dark Age Economics: The Origins of Towns and Trade*, published in 1982. Furthermore, from the late 1970s, Hodges had already begun his long relationship with Italy, with surveys carried out in Molise, followed by excavations at the site of Santa Maria in Civita, in the Biferno Valley (Hodges, Barker and Wade 1980).

So in October 1981, the 29-year old Hodges and the 35-year old Francovich, who probably had already heard of one another, met for the first time at Antella. As Hodges often recalled, the meeting developed into a long,

Figure 1 Riccardo Francovich and Richard Hodges at Antella (© Richard Hodges).

impassioned chat that lasted throughout the day and the next one as well, and it was on that occasion that Francovich first took Hodges to visit his 'headquarters' at the University of Siena. Their joint enthusiasm, their unanimity of views on many aspects of research, Francovich's desire to engage in collaborations that could enrich his career as an archaeologist, all meant that from that first meeting a joint project was on the cards and began to take form.

As it was, they were both at important moments of transition in their careers. Hodges, attached to the University of Sheffield, was seeking a site in Italy to investigate, which, following the surveys in Molise, he found in the Abbey of San Vincenzo al Volturno. Francovich, after some urban excavations of limited extent, was concluding his first major project at Rocca di Scarlino, a small village in the province of Grosseto. At this site, for the first time, fleeting traces of early medieval sequences had been identified, phases which preceded the construction of the castle there in the central Middle Ages. The excavation at Rocca di Scarlino had revealed the only instance then known from Tuscany of an early medieval sequence of settlement continuity, from *curtis* to castle, in contrast to the already well-established model of *ex novo* formation of castles, that had been formulated by Pierre Toubert less than ten years earlier, in his work on the lands of the abbeys of Farfa and Subiaco (Toubert 1973). Further evidence pointing in the same direction had been brought to light by Hodges in his excavations at Santa Maria in Civita, in Molise.

The terrain was therefore more than fertile for the two scholars to collaborate on a research project that had at its centre of interest the study of the evolving dynamic of settlement between the early and late Middle Ages. After a failed attempt, largely due to logistics, to start excavation at the early medieval abbey of Monteverdi (resumed by this writer 22 years later), it was decided to focus attention once again on a castle: Montarrenti, a site a short distance from Siena (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Map of Tuscany showing location of sites mentioned.

Figure 3 Aerial view of the castle of Montarrenti (©Topography, Landscape Archaeology and Remote Sensing LAB, Università di Siena).

Excavation began in 1982, just a year after their first meeting, and was concentrated on the summit and on the slopes below the castle, where the remains of the late medieval village could be discerned among the trees (Figure 3). The team, strongly interdisciplinary in its make-up, consisting of Italian and English researchers and students (Figure 4), began what was then probably the most extensive and complex archaeological survey of a rural medieval site in Italy.

Figure 4 The Montarrenti excavation team in 1983.

Early medieval contexts and phases were preserved in greater number and in a less fragmentary state at Montarrenti than at Scarlino and the experience gained by the two directors from the excavations, and their subsequent intense debates over the evidence, tracked in a series of preliminary articles, were comprehensively presented and discussed at a celebrated conference held in Siena in 1988, published in 1990 (Francovich and Hodges 1990). This congress, in which Toubert also participated, marked an important moment in the development of thinking on the theme of fortification. The light-hearted name given to the meeting by historians, the 'conference of post holes' (Comba 2011: 50), actually captured a deeper significance. At Montarrenti, for the first time, a new interpretative model for the evolution of early medieval fortified settlement was developed, incorporating evidence from the earlier excavations at Scarlino and from surface survey in the surrounding territory. This model had its starting point in those very post holes, tenuous shadows of early settlement structures. In their dynamics, these two castles, made to live again by the archaeology, came to represent a complex historical reality which can be summed up as follows: during the 7th century, with the final disintegration of the landscapes of Roman antiquity and the disappearance of inhabited areas on the plains, spontaneous aggregation of population led to the establishment of settlement nuclei on high ground; only later would these nuclei become the sites of *curtes*, which in the 10th century would start to evolve into castles (also Augenti, this volume).

Thanks to the excavations at Montarrenti, and the joint work of Francovich and Hodges, this interpretative model, later called the 'Tuscan model', founded largely on the physical evidence, was clearly formulated for the first time. This gave rise to a new era of investigations in Tuscany as well as in other parts of Italy, characterized by greater attention being paid to periods preceding the 10th century, now seen as a time of consolidation of transformations already under way and not, as Toubert had suggested, as the beginning of a process linked to fortification.

After establishing the foundations of this new interpretation of rural settlements, the professional paths of Francovich and Hodges diverged. The first, aware that it would be possible to develop a historical narrative that could be sustained in scientific debate only by way of a critical mass of data from a particular territory, launched a long series of surveys with his numerous collaborators, particularly in southern Tuscany, beginning with a now famous excavation at the castle of Rocca San Silvestro. Hodges, on the other hand, who in 1988 had become director of the British School at Rome, continued his excavations in Molise at the monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno, that still today constitute the most comprehensive and complete archaeological investigation of a medieval monastery and its territory ever undertaken in Italy.

If these choices took Hodges and Francovich on different paths, it did not mark any distance in their professional life or in their friendship. The red thread that bound Hodges to Francovich and to Tuscany remained taut and strong. This was due not only to the numerous lectures and classes which Hodges gave at the University of Siena, and to his continuous visits to Francovich's new excavation, but also to his participation in conferences in Siena and to his prolific contributions to Francovich's journal, *Archeologia Medievale*. Antella and the beautiful Tuscan countryside around it became a sort of second home for Hodges and a precious observatory from which he could observe, assist and participate in the development of Francovich's major projects. Among these were the birth of the first Archaeological-Mineral Park of Rocca San Silvestro and the foundation of the Parks of the Val di Cornia. This was an illuminating experience for Hodges, as he so often wrote, which inspired him in his work at Butrint, another exceptional professional adventure which followed the excavations at the monastery in Molise. This new project represented a further, indirect link with Tuscany and Francovich, since Hodges invited students from Siena to participate in the work at Butrint, providing an invaluable training opportunity on one of the most important archaeological investigations in the Balkan-Adriatic region in those years.

As a result of their separate experiences, the two scholars decided at the beginning of the new millennium to return to reflect on the topics they had debated some twenty years earlier. The outcome of this 'return' was the publication of a short, but dense, jointly-authored monograph entitled *Villa to Village* (Francovich and Hodges 2003). In this volume, Francovich and Hodges, assuming the fundamental validity of archaeological evidence as historical testimony, elaborated further on the so-called Tuscan model which had been first formulated in the late 80s, extending the pattern of the collapse of late Roman forms of settlement and their replacement by new higher-ground villages beyond Tuscany, to the entire Italian peninsula.

Francovich's sudden death in 2007 could have marked the end of this intense bond with Tuscany – but it was not to be. Despite Hodges' distance from Europe at the time – since 2007 he had been the Williams Director

at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, in Philadelphia – his visits to Tuscany and Siena were still frequent. He regularly looked in on the excavations being carried out by Francovich's students, served as a visiting professor from 2007 to 2008 at the University of Siena, and was a frequent participant in seminars and in events organized in memory of Francovich. In 2010, a short but intense season of excavation at the Tuscan monastery of San Pietro d'Asso (Campana, Hobart and Hodges 2012) was the prelude to considerably more significant commitments that would develop in the following years and would strengthen once again the thread that bound Hodges to Tuscany.

Present day

The chance came in 2014.

The passing of Francovich had not interrupted his programme of research; his students picked up and continued his projects with success both in the area of Siena and in the Maremma. These continued, in particular, in the Metalliferous Hills, tied into research for their doctoral dissertations. The Metalliferous Hills are an area in south-western Tuscany that extends from the mountains of Campiglia Marittima to Massa Marittima; included in that area is the immediate hinterland of the Gulf of Follonica, an important centre for the iron and steel industry. This area has played a role of considerable historical importance, due to the mining activities that have been carried out there since Etruscan times and that, during the Middle Ages, were aimed chiefly at the exploitation of local deposits of mixed sulphides of copper, lead and silver. The castle of Rocca San Silvestro was one of the centres of this activity. Between 2007 and 2014 a number of excavations were undertaken, at the castle of Donoratico, at Rocca Alberti in Monterotondo Marittimo, at the mining castle of Cugnano, and at the monasteries of Monteverdi and San Quirico di Populonia (Figure 2). At the same time there were major projects at the castle of Montieri and at the nearby rural Canonica dedicated to San Niccolò (Bianchi 2014). New surveys got underway, in particular around Monterotondo Marittimo and in the plain below the castle of Scarlino. Survey at Scarlino led to the discovery of a promising site in the locality of Vetricella, characterized by the presence of concentric circular markings (Figure 5). Initial limited excavation had identified this as an artificial hillock surrounded by concentric ditches, and the findings were presented and debated at a meeting at Scarlino (Marasco 2013).

Figure 5 Aerial view of Vetricella before the excavation
(© Ancient Topography, Landscape Archaeology & Remote Sensing LAB, Università di Siena).

The data and provisional conclusions from this most recent programme of projects in the Metalliferous Hills, in the years following Francovich's death, and a review of previous projects in the region, can be summarized as follows (Bianchi 2014, Bianchi 2015):

1. The existence, both on the coastal plains and in their immediate hinterland, of early medieval sites which in many cases showed evidence of continuous occupation since Late Antiquity. On the plain of Scarlino these sites were replaced, in the course of the 12th century, by a new type of fortified settlement.
2. The existence of 'high-ground settlements' starting mainly in the 8th century, generally small in size, linked to vital and dynamic communities. These are often attested in the documentary sources but generally are not characterized by particular social markers.
3. There is evidence for the profound transformation of some settlements with respect to others, starting in the late 9th/early 10th centuries. These dynamically evolving sites, which would have been associated with special commissions of a strongly public character, represented the first fortified settlements. Subsequently, in the later 10th century, many other early medieval sites would be transformed into castles, as the first local seigneury came into existence.
4. The move of large numbers of the urban aristocracy to their rural estates began only in the 12th century, at a time when further sweeping transformations were taking place at these sites, with the use of stone as the main construction material and the widespread erection of aristocratic residences.
5. The extraction of mineral resources, commencing in the 8th century when sites such as Cugnano and Rocchette Pannocchieschi were established, located either at the heart of the mining areas or in their vicinity.
6. The hypothesis, for the early Middle Ages, of a system of exploitation of mineral resources connected to central public powers that would have coordinated a system for extracting and processing metal ore at the mining sites and its transport to settlements on the coastal plain, close to the ports from which it was later shipped. This type of organization would end with the diffusion of the local seigneury and the appearance of the first gentrified districts.
7. A more structured organization of cereal production and distribution also commenced from the end of the 9th century, associated with the erection of barns, traces of which have been found in many high-ground settlements.

All this indicated a substantial change in the shape of settlements, which appeared first in the early medieval period, generally from the end of the 9th century, and underwent gradual transformation until the great 12th-century phase of fortification, that coincided with the rebirth of cities, such as Pisa, and the beginnings of a new maritime trade and the formation of the first communes. To understand these changes some important pieces critical to the completion of the jigsaw were missing and could be obtained only through further investigation in four areas:

1. the histories of the formation, transformation and economic trajectories of the sites on the plains;
2. the relationship between the sites on the plains, especially the coastal ones, and those on the interior hilltops, in the exploitation of natural resources;
3. the relationship between population dynamics and the transformation of the wooded and agricultural environments; and
4. the connections between these transformations and the main political players.

Pursuing these objectives would enable us to reconstruct a complex history which, founded on the wealth of data acquired both from Francovich's research and from that of his students, could become paradigmatic for a broader history, setting this territory alongside others in the Tyrrhenian and western Mediterranean areas, in terms of the transformations of the anthropic and natural landscape, particularly in relation to systems of economic growth.

To do this, a major initiative was necessary, in order to acquire the resources necessary for the development of a comprehensive multidisciplinary project. In fact, a team was practically already formed for this, as recent research in the mining areas in the hinterland of the coast had offered the chance to assemble an interdisciplinary group which, as well as archaeologists with different specialisms and documentary historians, included anthropologists, archaeozoologists, archaeometallurgists, chemists, archaeobotanists and geomorphologists (Benvenuto *et al.* 2014). What was missing was support for the project from a major funding body, and the propulsive thrust of someone outside the team who would be able to enhance it with his experience.

As far as the project was concerned, the opportunity, as indicated above, presented itself in 2014 with the launch of the ERC-Advanced Grant within the broader Horizon 2020 programme. As for the outside project director, in 2013 Hodges had returned to Italy as President of the American University at Rome. In the autumn of that year I showed him a draft of the future project and he immediately welcomed the proposal to participate, as Principal Investigator, in the application for an ERC-Advanced Grant, to carry out what was designed to be an ideal continuation of a research programme initiated by Francovich. Thirty-two years on from a distant 1981, Hodges again agreed to be involved in a complex project in Tuscany that, if the application was successful, would continue for five years.

The drafting of the project led to a series of meetings between the Siena team, coordinated by myself and Hodges, in which the wealth of data assembled over the past decades was debated and analysed in the context of current overviews of the Mediterranean, to formulate the precise aims and objectives of the project. The result was a research proposal entitled *Origins of a new economic union (7th-12th centuries): resources, landscapes and political strategies in a Mediterranean region* (acronym *nEU-Med*)). The focus of the project began with a consideration of important European overviews that had been published by a number of scholars, including Hodges himself, since the millennium. These were concerned, in particular, with Northern Europe which, unlike the South, underwent an important and homogeneous economic development between the 7th and 9th centuries (McCormick 2001; Wickham 2005; Hodges 2012; Loveluck 2013). This differed from southern Europe, where some areas such as Italy became involved in similar processes of transformation and development only from the 9th century onwards. This brought about the gradual formation of a more balanced economic scenario, from the 12th century, the prelude to a more comprehensive and unitary system of trade and cultural exchange between northern and southern Europe. The procedures, development and conditions of this first fundamental growth of the western Mediterranean, that took place between the 7th and 12th century, remained to be understood in their entirety.

Major studies had emphasized how the early medieval economy in this part of the Mediterranean was tied to trade between economic systems relating to land and maritime spaces, osmotically interconnected but typically linked to political-territorial realities often confined to 'regional' areas (Abulafia 2011; Broodbank 2013; Wickham 2015; McCormick 2001). The nature and the manner of these exchanges and the speed of their wide-spread recovery and impact on many aspects of material culture as well as social and economic history, between the 8th and the 11th centuries, were and are still being debated. According to some, these exchanges were much reduced for a good part of the early Middle Ages in an economy that was based essentially on the possession of land and which would recover only between the 10th and 11th century, as a result of increasing wealth and consumption on the part of the aristocracy, to reach its peak in the 12th century. According to others, these exchanges were part of a much longer trajectory, which even in the Carolingian age had seen the commercial conditions for an economic upturn and its subsequent development within the context of large-scale trading economies. These different interpretations have given rise to a sort of interpretative dichotomy that has often kept commercial development on a different level from evolution associated with the exploitation of natural resources (agricultural, mining etc.).

The territory considered for the project coincided with a vast area of the Metalliferous Hills, between the Gulf of Piombino-Follonica and a hinterland of plains crossed by two rivers, the Pecora and the Cornia (Figure 6). In the Middle Ages this area was characterised by a variety of natural environments (coastal marshland, hills, mountainous regions) and numerous economic resources (forestry, salt production, animal husbandry, cereal growing, mineral resources). These features made this area an excellent territory for investigation, typical of the western Mediterranean and representative of other contexts with similar features. The presence of ports in the Gulf in the early Middle Ages, and of inland territories that could be exploited for valued resources, make it a 'laboratory' for the evaluation of increases in trade, but also for possible growth in relation to changes in the landscape.

To evaluate the relationship between coast/trade and agricultural production most effectively and to assess the exploitation of mineral resources, it was decided to focus primarily on the plains and coastal sites, which had not been analysed in Francovich's many years of research – he had focussed on inland and 'high-ground settlements'. Vetricella, with its concentric ditches close to the lagoon and the river Pecora, was one of the key sites chosen for extensive examination, together with Carlappiano and its territory, close to the mouth of the river Cornia and the lagoon of Piombino. In a second phase, it was proposed to direct attention towards the hinterland, to investigate both mining territories and areas of the plains and hills which were devoted to farming.

Figure 6 The area investigated by the ERC-advanced nEU-Med project.

This kind of global study of a territory demands strong interdisciplinarity on the part of the project team. As we have seen, this was essentially already in place and was reinforced during the design phase. The project envisaged the Department of Historical Sciences and Cultural Heritage of the University of Siena as the host institution, with two other departments with their respective expertise also involved: the Department of Biotechnology, Chemistry and Pharmacy and the Department of Physical, Earth and Environmental Sciences (www.neu-med.unisi.it). External collaborations with the Universities of Florence, Pisa, Tuscia, Naples II, Federico II were also proposed. A scientific board composed of colleagues from Italian and foreign universities would guarantee continuous and constructive oversight during the various stages of the investigation through workshops and conferences scheduled at regular intervals as the project progressed.

In April 2015, after an extremely rigorous selection process, the project was accepted by the European Union and financed for the entire amount requested, €2.5 million. On the 1st October of that year the project officially started, and is designed to run for five years.

In the first year and a half a very considerable sum was channelled to about twenty young researchers who were given the opportunity to continue their training within the scope of the project. Almost all the internal tasks of the project were implemented, with a focus on the coastal areas in this first phase, and subsequently archaeological work started at the sites of Vetricella and Carlappiano (Figures 7 and 8), beginning with survey and diagnostics campaigns. In September and October 2016 about fifty students, new graduates and doctoral candidates worked on the excavation of the two sites (Figure 9). This was followed by an intensive winter season of work on the small finds, especially the ceramics, metal objects, animal bones and coins.

The study of the natural landscape began with an analysis of the palaeochannel of the river Pecora. This could be examined section by section, which had been revealed in recent years during reclamation work associated with the construction of a large reservoir. An analysis of the carbon content in the fill of the palaeochannel itself made possible the reconstruction of the vegetal landscape in the period between the 9th and 10th century. Later, a reconnaissance of the river-bed upstream allowed us to reconstruct its modification over time by human interventions. Geoarchaeologists and archaeobotanists studied the soils and anthracological remains present in the anthropic and natural sequences as they emerged little by little in the course of excavations that were designed to understand the characteristics of the lagoon areas in the vicinity. Pollen analyses on samples taken from different contexts are still being studied.

Figure 7 The Vetricella site at the end of the first excavation season (October 2016).

Figure 8 The Carlappiano site at the end of the first excavation season (October 2016).

Figure 9 Team photo at Vetricella.

Archaeometric analysis was carried out on particular ceramic finds, for instance on locally-produced transport containers, to identify the areas of production, their circulation and their function. At the same time, an analysis of hundreds of ceramic sherds found during an old excavation at one of the ports on the Gulf (Scabris) allowed us to ascertain the quantity of commodities that passed through this port in the period between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, as well as those that were distributed in the hinterland of the coastal area in the same period. Indicators of metallurgical production, such as reduction slag and crucibles, found at Vetricella, were subjected to laboratory analysis.

A working group of numismatists and archaeometallurgists started a systematic collection of samples from 9th and 12th century coins (so far over 60, but expected to increase with the continuation of the project), from various Tuscan excavations and from museum collections, for archaeometric analysis, in order to reconstruct the area of origin of the metal and the processes of its supply.

This was followed by documentary research cross-referenced with a general review of archaeological data from earlier investigations. At the same time, the GIS base which had been set up previously was enhanced and an archive was established to enable data from the various sections of the team to be shared and cross-examined. A web site (www.neu-med.unisi.it), a Facebook page and social media presences allow for continuous updating of the work in progress.

This first year and a half has seen the publication of the excavation of the monastery of San Quirico di Populonia (Bianchi and Gelichi 2016). This is an earlier project but the data have been reworked and revised in the context of the objectives of the current project and its initial results. On 30th March 2017 a memorial exhibition on the tenth anniversary of the death of Riccardo Francovich was inaugurated to pay homage, through the project, to the person who had inspired it with his ideas and had made it possible through the extent of his research. On 12th and 13th April 2017 at a workshop held in Siena, the team presented the first results of the project in a discussion with Italian colleagues as well as with the members of the scientific board (Figure 10).

The new data from the first phase of the project have strengthened and enhanced our initial hypothetical model. The evidence from Vetricella and the surrounding sites identified in the survey has shown that in the early Middle Ages settlement hubs of considerable economic importance could have existed on the plains and continued to thrive at least until the later Middle Ages. At the same time, the analysis of the documentary sources cross-referenced with the material evidence is revealing the important role played by the fiscal estates of the principal public agents in this territory, especially in relation to their exploitation of resources (in particular, mining). To judge from the data collected so far, the public authority would have had a considerable influence in shaping the reality of the settlements, the landscapes and the means of extraction, processing and end-use of natural resources. The growing importance of the aristocracy would have been dependent on and directly proportional to their participation in ventures coordinated by the central power.

Figure 10 Participants at the first nEU-Med workshop (Siena, 12-13 April 2017).

The next phases of the project will enable us to understand whether the public political subjects' (king, counts, the marquises of Tuscia) desire for reorganization was only a feature of the late 9th- and 10th-century stages of mineral extraction in the region – something that is suggested by the chronologies deduced from the investigations so far – or if this had already been the case in earlier periods.

Hopefully, this data in its entirety will constitute a broad cognitive basis with which to move our gaze from the particular case of this type-territory to a wider geographic horizon. This should make it possible to understand the mechanisms and chronologies of economic growth, in particular with regards to trade and commerce in this part of the Mediterranean.

There is certainly still a lot to be done, especially on the relationship between this and other territories of medieval Tuscany, central-north Italy and beyond the Alps – possible cognate developments which could give strength to the new historical readings and models. In any case the whole project is an exciting venture that almost has the taste of a challenge. Indeed, if the challenge had not been there, Richard, who always loves a challenge, might never have developed a passion for this project.

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