

1-1-2002

# The Etruscan Castellum: Fortified Settlements and Regional Autonomy in Etruria

Hilary W. Becker

---

## Recommended Citation

Becker, Hilary W. (2002) "The Etruscan Castellum: Fortified Settlements and Regional Autonomy in Etruria," *Etruscan Studies*: Vol. 9, Article 9.

Available at: [http://scholarworks.umass.edu/etruscan\\_studies/vol9/iss1/9](http://scholarworks.umass.edu/etruscan_studies/vol9/iss1/9)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Etruscan Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

*The Etruscan Castellum:  
Fortified Settlements and  
Regional Autonomy in Etruria*

---

BY HILARY W. BECKER

*Inde in Faliscum agrum copiis reductis, cum impedimenta Faleriis cum modico praesidio reliquisset, expedito agmine ad populandos hostium fines incedit. Omnia ferro ignique vastantur; praedae undique actae. Nec solum modo vastum hosti relictum sed castellis etiam vicisque inlatus ignis: urbibus oppugnandis temperatum, in quas timor Etruscos compulerat (Livy 10.12.7-8).*

The accounts of Roman historians describe Etruria as a landscape that was peppered with different types of settlements ranging from cities to villages. Extensive surveys and excavations such as those in the area of Veii, Falerii, Volterra and Fiesole have confirmed this variety and indeed have done much to enrich our understanding of not only Etruscan cities but also of smaller settlements.<sup>1</sup> It is within this latter category that a new group of settlements seems to be discernible on the basis of archaeological investigations conducted in the last 50 years and corroborated by the ancient authors themselves. It consists of a fairly homogeneous pattern of fortified hilltop settlements that has not been recognized for the whole of Etruria before. Defining the nature of this pattern provides an opportunity to examine the socio-economic interactions within Etruria on a more microscopic scale, and suggests how the smaller settlements may have participated in regional activities.

The sample of sites under consideration consists of a series of inhabited hilltops that became fortified by the Hellenistic period if not before. The settlements tend to be rather small and have an area that is typically no larger than two hectares within its walls. The inhabitants of these hilltops tend to be concentrated on the hill or around it, and their primary economy is agricultural. In addition, at some sites we can document the presence of an elite social class through the monumental, burial or artifact evidence in and around some of the sites. While a number of field surveys and excavations have identified sites with such charac-



figure 1 – Distribution of small fortified settlements (castella) in Etruria according to city territories. (Map by H.W. Becker (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) and Tom Elliott (Ancient World Mapping Center, [www.unc.edu/awmc](http://www.unc.edu/awmc)). Territorial boundaries after L. Bonfante, ed. 1986 with modifications. Reconstruction of ancient coastline following W.V. Harris (Maps 41 and 42) and N. Purcell (Map 44) in R. Talbert, ed. 2000).

teristics, they have not been studied as a class overall in Etruria. Thus it is important as these sites are examined to keep in mind the criteria for defining this typology but also to be aware of the location and spatial relation of each (fig. 1). Thus far I have identified 16 sites (only some of which will be discussed in this paper) that share these characteristics, however there are surely more that may yet be identified.

In order to consider these settlements, let us look first to the area around Fiesole, where an extensive survey has brought to light a number of these fortified settlements (fig. 2). The first site, Poggio la Croce, is a fortified settlement located between Fiesole and Siena. The site is situ-

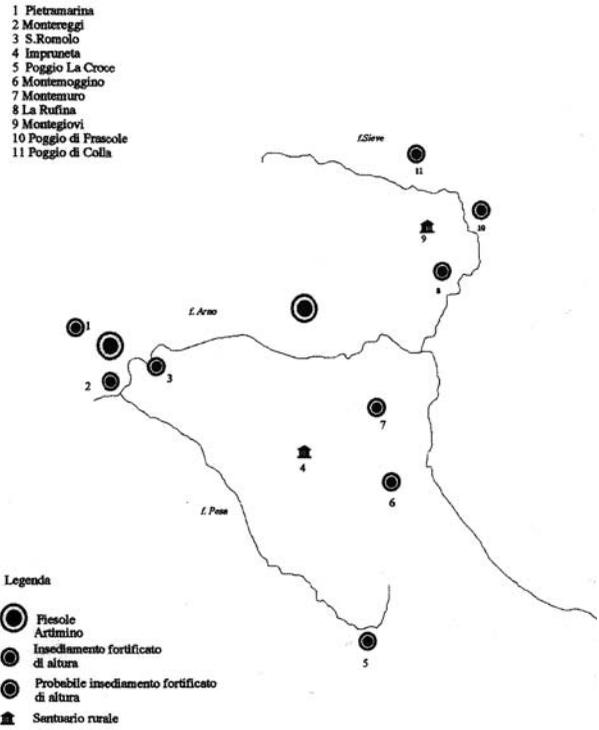


figure 2 – The fortified settlements in the territory of Fiesole (after Cresci and Viviani 1995b, fig. 50).

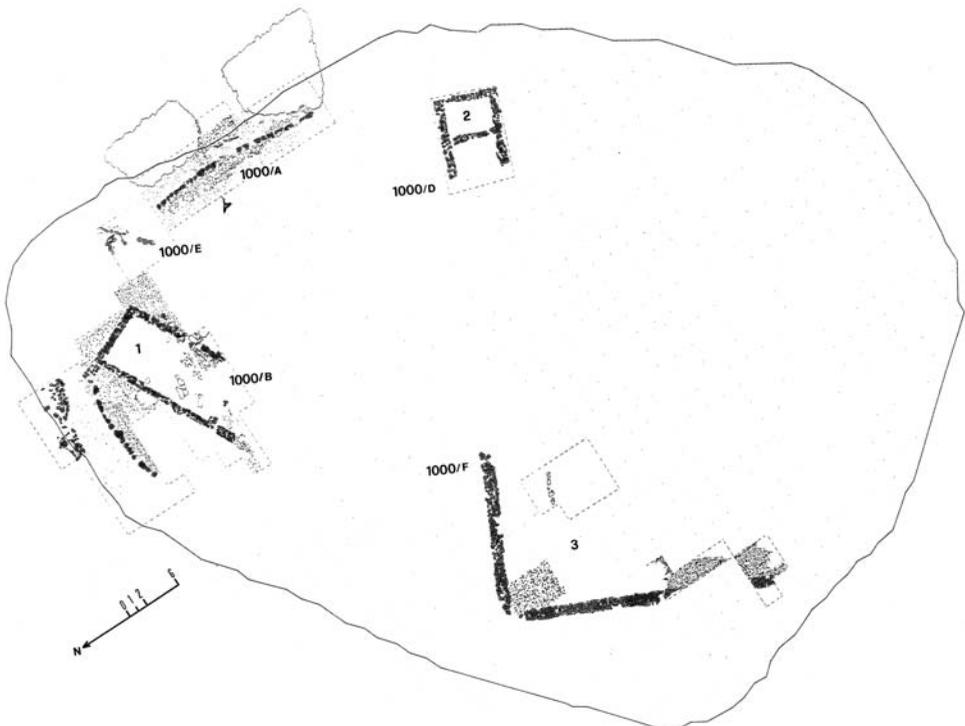


figure 3 – Plan of Poggio la Croce (Cresci and Viviani 1995b, fig. 46).



figure 4 – View of the excavations at Donoratico. On the far left, the Etruscan fortification wall. Above, a Medieval wall (Photo: J. A. Becker)..



figure 5 – Medieval Scarlino (Barberini 1985, tav. IV).

walls, located on the north side of the hill, may have once held a bastion or tower.<sup>11</sup> Fortification walls have also been found on the eastern and southern sides of the hill, although they have not yet been excavated. However, in plan the wall was rectangular and followed the

ated on a high hill which provided excellent visibility of the Pesa valley to the north-west and the Monti del Chianti to the southeast.<sup>2</sup> During the Archaic period the fertile farmland surrounding Poggio la Croce is thought to be owned by members of the upper class, whose presence is indicated by elite funerary monuments nearby.<sup>3</sup> While little is known about the Classical period here, Poggio la Croce flourishes in the Hellenistic period when it acquires monumental fortifications (fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> At this time, the perimeter of the settlement was defined by means of a terracing wall. A stone fortification wall was built within the circuit of the drystone external wall and its construction is dated by ceramic evidence to the fourth century BC.<sup>5</sup> The economy, as was typical in early Italy, was based primarily on agriculture and herding. Charred grain seeds, sandstone millstones and large terracotta storage jars testify to the inhabitants' agricultural activity.<sup>6</sup> There is also evidence of wool working, iron working and the production of hand-molded ceramics. Additionally, a good number of objects, especially ceramics, were probably imported from Volterra and Fiesole.<sup>7</sup> The sum of this evidence reveals that that this small site was a largely self-sufficient community, and more importantly that this community was a stable habitation for several centuries. The presence of imports implies a system of exchange, which demonstrates that Poggio la Croce interacted outside of its immediate area.<sup>8</sup>

Further north there is another fortified settlement, Poggio Colla, located in the Mugello River basin, twenty-two miles northeast of Florence.<sup>9</sup> The site had a strategic position, because it overlooked the area where the Mugello basin joins the Val di Sieve. Poggio Colla was active from the middle of the seventh century to the end of the third century BC and a monumental fortification wall was built around it.<sup>10</sup>

Although only part of the wall has been explored by excavations, a pair of nearly parallel walls, located on the north side of the hill, may have once held a bastion or tower.<sup>11</sup> Fortification walls have also been found on the eastern and southern sides of the hill, although they have not yet been excavated. However, in plan the wall was rectangular and followed the

contours of the hilltop. In addition, it is noteworthy that there is an elite presence at and around Poggio Colla by the end of the seventh century BC.<sup>12</sup> Like at Poggio la Croce, there is evidence of imported fine wares at Poggio Colla that attest that the site was trading by the fifth century BC.<sup>13</sup>

Another interesting hilltop settlement, near Poggio la Croce, is Cetamura, located on a steep hill that is almost 700 meters above sea level.<sup>14</sup> It is 30 kilometers or more from the nearest major cities (Siena, Fiesole, Arezzo and Volterra).<sup>15</sup> The site was occupied in the Archaic and Hellenistic periods, but so far there is no indication of pre-Medieval fortification walls.<sup>16</sup> Still, Cetamura fits well in this survey because it was naturally fortified by its height and its steepness, and because it shares affinities with many small hilltop sites around Fiesole.<sup>17</sup> In addition to those reviewed so far, there are perhaps as many as seven other small hilltop sites around Fiesole that were fortified in the Etruscan period.<sup>18</sup> These sites formed a loose



*figure 6 – Fortification wall at Rofalco (Rendeli 1993, fig. 85).*

ring around Fiesole, and some are nearly equidistant from the major cities in their area.

Another fortified settlement is Donoratico, which is near the Tyrrhenian coast and beyond the territory of Fiesole. Donoratico is considered to be on the southern edge of Volterra's territory, but its proximity to Populonia makes this association by no means secure.<sup>19</sup> Little can be said today with precision about Donoratico, because the Etruscan layers of this site have just begun to be excavated, but the presence of a monumental fortification wall dating to the Archaic or Classical period is certain (fig. 4).

There are also two rock cut chamber tombs in the cliffs below the hill of Donoratico that are dated to the fifth century BC. These tombs, as well as a bronze tripod leg found on the summit, are clear attestations of an elite presence at this site, a testimony to the "emergence of a princely class that is tied to agriculture and to the exploitation of mineral resources" in this area.<sup>20</sup> Donoratico's proximity to the coast, as well as to the Colline Metallifere, suggest that it was optimally sited to control trade and resources in its area.

Further south along the Tyrrhenian coast there is another fortified settlement by the name of Scarlino. It is on a steep hilltop 11 kilometers away from Vetulonia and 31 kilometers from Populonia. The ancient layers of Scarlino date from fifth through the second centuries BC.<sup>21</sup> A Medieval castle was later built on top of Scarlino's summit, thus limiting our knowledge of the ancient phases (fig. 5). However, a fortification wall has been found on the south-eastern edge of the hilltop. This wall dates to the Hellenistic period and is two meters thick.<sup>22</sup>

Small fortified settlements were not only localized in North Etruria, but can also be found in South Etruria, for example at a site known as Rofalco to the north of Vulci. A

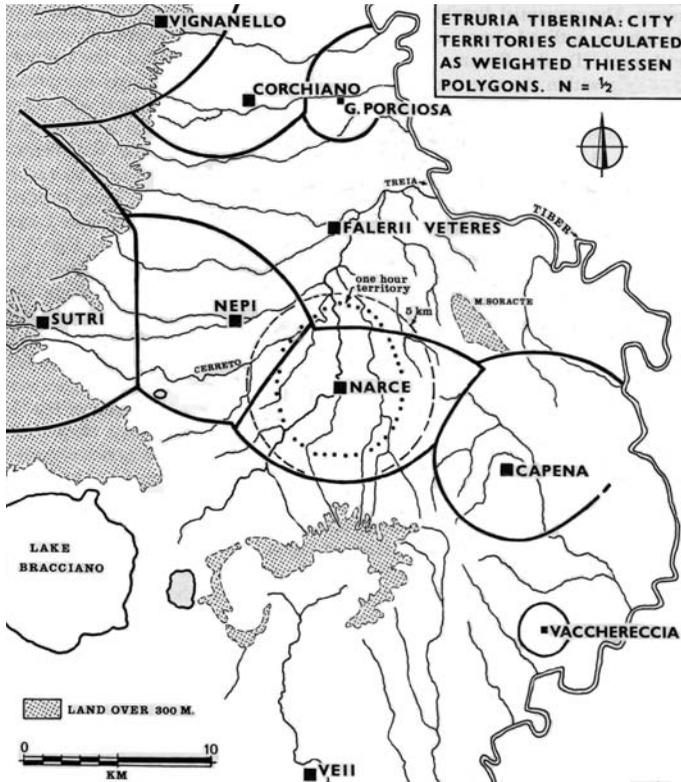


figure 7 – Vacchereccia and the Ager Faliscus in the fifth century BC. (Potter 1976, fig. 8).

date to the Etruscan period and are small in size.<sup>25</sup> In addition both sites are located at a distance from the major cities in their region and are not easily assigned to the territory of any particular city. Vacchereccia is of special interest because it is located near the border between the territory of Veii and the Faliscan cities (fig. 7).<sup>26</sup> Vacchereccia's position, added to the site's proximity to the Tiber, reveals that this fortified site was located strategically.

The settlements in this survey are small, elevated and fortified by means of natural and man-made defenses, with the possible exception of Cetamura. These sites had resident populations and were not merely military outposts. The sites were all located at a considerable distance from the nearest cities and were often near the border of the territory controlled by them. These settlements may have been on the periphery of the city's sphere of power as well. It is possible that the control exercised by the larger cities diminished at an extended distance, thus causing a power vacuum to exist between the sphere of the city and the area controlled by each fortified settlement. This circumstance may have allowed each settlement to have some degree of autonomy in its own area. Further, sites such as Cetamura, Donoratico and Vacchereccia are not easily assigned to one major city or another; these sites may have had somewhat of an ambiguous allegiance. And it is possible that the territorial ownership of these settlements could have changed hands over time. Thus its rulers likely had to be diplomats and double dealers to ensure that the site was not subsumed.

There are several other factors that may have allowed these sites to be

steep slope naturally fortifies the south side of Rofalco, while the rest of the summit is surrounded by a massive fortification wall.<sup>23</sup> There are two towers along this wall, and the presence of a third has been suggested by the excavators (fig. 6). The pottery at Rofalco indicates that this site was in use from the late sixth century to the early third century BC.<sup>24</sup>

There are at least two small fortified hilltop settlements, even further south, in the Ager Faliscus, near Rome. Thus far Vacchereccia and Grotta Colonna have only been surveyed, however they have fortification walls that

autonomous. First they are physically formidable on account of their natural elevation as well as their fortifications. The hilltop setting as well as the fortification walls are, of course, the two most prominent features of this settlement type.<sup>27</sup> Additionally these settlements are located in positions that were favorable for trade and communication. These sites had surrounding farmland and sometimes local industry, factors which helped them to be self-sufficient.

One of the most essential characteristics of this settlement type, about which we can only hypothesize, is a system of governance. We have considered how each functioned within its immediate area and within the territory of a city-state. But what was the driving force behind the settlement type itself? Etruscan society was dominated by aristocratic families in both the cities and the countryside. At some of these sites, such as at Poggio la Croce, Poggio Colla, Cetamura and Donoratico, an aristocracy can be documented by prestige objects and elite tombs. The presence of an aristocracy is probably an important characteristic of this settlement type and it reinforces the autonomous nature of these settlements.

Elite family names have not yet been found at any of the settlements discussed in this paper, but it can be reasonably hypothesized that some of the elite families present at these sites would have the same names as those inhabiting the major centers in the area. That is not to say that elite urban families colonized these settlements, but rather that as families grew, some members might have come to possess land that was far from the city center. Phil Perkins has suggested that there was a relationship between elite families of the urban center and the settlements in its territory such that the head of the urban *gens* would protect the rural branches of his family.<sup>28</sup> We can also hypothesize that an elite rural family resident in one of these fortified sites would have had a network of *clientela* with other families in the surrounding area.<sup>29</sup> Thus it may be suggested that there was a hierarchy of social standing that connected the urban settlements to these fortified sites and these fortified sites in turn to smaller settlements in their vicinity.

The pattern of small fortified settlements so far described may well be referred to in some classical sources about Etruria. There are many different Latin terms to describe settlements, including *urbs*, *oppidum* and *vicus*. But there is one Latin term, *castellum*, which probably aptly applies to the category of hilltop settlements observed here.<sup>30</sup> The primary meaning of *castellum* is a fortified settlement or garrison. *Castella* appear all over the empire, often as purely military outposts. In a number of contexts, *castella* are often specifically described as being located on elevated summits. But there is very probably a secondary meaning of the term *castellum*, which applies to non-Roman settlements in Italy, especially in Etruria. Livy mentions *castella* in the territories of the unknown town of Troilum, as well as in the Ager Faliscus and Ager Volsiniensis.<sup>31</sup> These textual instances are interesting because there is a relationship between a given city and the *castella* nearby—an observation that becomes more meaningful when we remember that these sites, such as Cetamura, Donoratico and Vacchereccia, tend to be located on territorial boundaries.

The Livy passage mentioned above is particularly interesting because he wrote that there were villages (*vici*), cities (*urbes*) and small fortified settlements (*castella*) within the Ager Faliscus.<sup>32</sup> Livy's careful differentiation of settlement types seems to be reflective of an ancient awareness of a hierarchical grouping of settlements by size and other

factors. Archaeological surveys of this area by the British School in Rome have identified a similar sample of sites. Conclusions gleaned from the Ager Faliscus, even granted the variability in settlement patterns that we know existed across Etruria, illustrate the range of settlements that could be found in most regions of Etruria.

The different characteristics and functions of the *castellum* that have been identified in this survey provide a working model with which we may understand other settlements. There is still a lot to learn about the ways in which *castella* functioned. For example, because few *castella* have been excavated, we do not understand fully the different features that a *castellum* could have had within its fortification walls; industrial complexes, sanctuaries, and houses have been found at some *castella*, but it is assumed for now that the layout of a *castellum* was not overly urban in character. Future excavation will surely bring to light more settlements that fit the definition of *castellum*. And while our understanding of the form and function of *castella* may be revised somewhat with more information, we now have the definition of a settlement type that will allow us to look at *castella* as part of a diverse settlement pattern rather than in isolation.

In the end, the archaeological sites may speak for themselves before we even begin to hypothesize and interpret, as a category of small fortified hilltop settlements can certainly be identified all over Etruria. These hilltop settlements have not been grouped together before, so that while the settlements around Fiesole have been studied, a pandemic pattern has not been recognized until now. These settlements are small and perched on hills, and are typically located near the territorial border of a city. Elites are clearly present at some of these *castella*, and it can be hypothesized that they had some functions of local administration. One of the most interesting things about this study is that there are many indications that the *castellum* functioned autonomously, at least in part, and that it had its own sphere of influence over the farms and villages in its immediate vicinity. The idea of territories dominated solely by a major city should now be revised in order to acknowledge the active role that *castella* had in the interplay between cities.

Department of Classics  
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Murphey Hall, CB # 3145  
Chapel Hill, NC 27599

#### NOTES

1. Ward Perkins 1955, 1961. M.W. Frederiksen. and J. B. Ward Perkins 1957. M. Valenti 1995. M. Torelli et al. 1992. Terrenato and Saggin 1994.
2. Cresci and Viviani 1995b, 261.
3. Cresci and Viviani 1995b, 263, 265. Cianferoni 1991, 30.
4. Cresci and Viviani (1995b, 265) date this phase from the end of the fourth century to the beginning of the second century BC. As with so many of the fortified sites in this

survey, it is possible that these sites had wooden fortifications at a time before they were fortified with stone walls.

5. Cresci and Viviani 1995a, 144.
6. Cresci and Viviani 1995a, 146-147.
7. Cresci and Viviani 1995a, 147-149.
8. Cresci and Viviani 1995b, 268.
9. Warden and Kane 1997, 159.
10. Warden and Thomas 1999, 111.
11. Warden et al. 1999, 231, 244. Warden and Thomas 1999, 111, 118-119. The northernmost wall has been dated by Warden et al. (1999, 244) to the Hellenistic phase and the southern wall may be as early as the late sixth or early fifth century BC.
12. Warden et al. 1999, 237, 245.
13. Warden et al. 1999, 239-240; Warden and Thomas 1999, 116.
14. de Grummond et al. 1994, 84.
15. de Grummond et al. 1994, 84- 85.
16. Pers. comm. P. Rowe, December 2001.
17. A naturally fortified position that had steep slopes was often comparable to the defensive capabilities of an *agger* or fortification wall. On this topic see A. Carandini, ed. 1985. *La Romanizzazione dell'Etruria: il territorio di Vulci*, 42.
18. Cresci and Viviani 1995a.
19. This site is known as Torre Donoratico, in order to distinguish it from the nearby modern town of Donoratico, which is on the coastal plain.
20. Terrenato and Saggin 1994, 470.
21. Barberini 1985, 92.
22. Barberini 1985, 92.
23. Rendeli 1985, 60.
24. Rendeli 1985, 61.
25. For Vacchereccia and Grotta Colonna see Jones 1962, 54, 151-154 and 153-154 respectively.
26. Potter 1976, fig. 8.
27. It is important to emphasize that these sites were not merely defensive outposts but permanently inhabited settlements. The abundance of pottery and other daily objects found at these sites attests to permanent habitation. The presence of tombs, particularly over time, is also indicative of habitation.
28. Perkins 1999, 174.
29. Perkins 1999, 174.
30. A more complete discussion of the term *castellum* as well as other Latin terms for settlements must be deferred to a future article. For the time being *castellum* is a useful moniker that seems to designate sites with characteristics such as those observed in this survey and indeed the Romans may well have recognized these sites as *castella*. While Etruscan fortified settlements have been given a number of different labels in modern scholarship, it is better to adopt a standard and appropriate term for this category. However this term must be used with caution for it remains unclear how

large a *castellum* was thought to be. With this consideration in mind, the sites in this study have been chosen conservatively (i.e. a size of c. two hectares or less) in the hopes of isolating a category of sites that share definite characteristics. See H. W. Becker. (Forthcoming). “*Urbs, oppidum, castellum, vicus*: settlement differentiation and landscape nomenclature in Etruria,” In G. Camporeale, ed., Proceedings of “*La città murata in Etruria*” XXVth Convegno di Studi Etruschi ed Italici.

31. Livy 10.46.10-12, 10.12.7-8, 9.41.6.  
32. Livy 10.12.7-8.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barberini, M. 1985. *Scarlinto e il suo territorio: evoluzione storica della Maremma*. Pisa.  
Bonfante, L. ed. 1986. *Etruscan Life and Afterlife*. Warminster.  
Carandini, A. ed. 1985. *La Romanizzazione dell'Etruria: il territorio di Vulci*. Firenze.  
Cianferoni, G.C. 1991. “Gli Etruschi nel Chianti.” *Il Chianti Storia Arte, Cultura Territorio* 15:19-34. Radda in Chianti: Centro di Studi Storici Chiantigiani.  
Cresci, M. and L. Viviani 1995a. “Defining an Economic area of the Hellenistic Period in Inland Northern Etruria.” *EtrStud* 2: 141-57.  
Cresci, M. and L. Viviani 1995b. “Poggio la Croce- Radda in Chianti: Rapporto preliminare delle campagne di scavo 1989- 1992.” In *Carta archeologica della provincia di Siena*. Vol. 1 edited by M. Valenti, 260-85. Siena.  
de Grummond, N. T., P. Rowe, R. Marrinan, and G. H. Doran. 1994. “Excavations at Cetamura del Chianti: 1987-1991.” *EtrStud* 1: 84-116.  
di Gennaro, F., O. Cerasuolo, C. Colonna, U. Rajala, S. Stoddart and N. Whitehead. 2002. “Recent Research on the City and Territory of Nepi (VT).” *PBSR* 60: 29-77.  
Frederiksen, M. W. and J. B. Ward Perkins. 1957. “The Ancient Road Systems of the Central and Northern Ager Faliscus. Notes of Southern Etruria, II.” *PBSR* 25: 67-208.  
Jones, G. D. B. 1962. “Capena and the Ager Capenas, Part I.” *PBSR* 30:116-207.  
Perkins, P. 1999. *Etruscan Settlement, Society and Material Culture in Central Coastal Etruria*. Oxford.  
Potter, T. W. 1976. *A Faliscan town in South Etruria: excavations at Narce 1966-71*. London.  
Rendeli, M. 1985. “L’oppidum di Rofalco nella Selva del Lamone.” In *La Romanizzazione dell'Etruria: il territorio di Vulci*, edited by A. Carandini, 60-1. Firenze.  
Rendeli, M. 1993. *Città aperta: Ambiente e paesaggio rurale organizzato nell'Etruria meridionale costiera durante l'età orientalizzante e arcaica*. Roma.  
Talbert, R. ed. 2000. *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*. Princeton.  
Torelli, M. et al. 1992. *Atlante dei siti archeologici della Toscana*. Firenze.  
Terrenato, N. and A. Saggin, 1994. “Ricognizioni archeologiche nel territorio di Volterra.” *ArchClas* 46: 465-82.

- Valenti, M. 1995. *Carta archeologica della provincia di Siena*. Vol. 1. Siena.
- Ward Perkins, J. B. 1955. "Notes on Southern Etruria and the Ager Veientanus." *PBSR* 23: 44- 72.
- Ward Perkins, J. B. 1961. "Veii: The Historical Topography of the Ancient City." *PBSR* 29: 1-123.
- Warden, P. G. and S. Kane. 1997. "Excavations at Poggio Colla (Vicchio) 1995-1996." *EtrStud* 4: 159-86.
- Warden, P. G. and M. L. Thomas. 1999. "Excavations at Poggio Colla: the 1998 Season." *EtrStud* 6: 111-22.
- Warden, P. G., M. L. Thomas, J. Galloway. 1999. "Excavations at the Etruscan Settlement of Poggio Colla: The 1995-1998 seasons." *JRA* 12: 231-46.

\* *This paper is based on a M.A. thesis that was carried out under the direction of Nicola Terrenato, whose advice and encouragement were invaluable. I also benefited from the help of G. K. Sams, G. Houston, J. Linderski and J. Turfa. Versions of this paper were presented at the CAMWS annual meeting in Austin, Texas, in April 2002 and at the Etruscans Now Conference at the British Museum in December 2002.*