

A CARVED BONE HEAD FROM POGGIO CIVITATE

(Con le tavv. XI-XIII f.t.)

INTRODUCTION

Poggio Civitate, an Etruscan site that flourished throughout the Orientalizing and Archaic periods (675-550/530 BCE), is situated at the juncture of Tuscany's 'Colline Metallifere' and the agriculturally rich region of the 'Crete Senesi' (*fig. 1*). The site witnessed two major phases of architectural development. The early phase consisted of several exceptionally large buildings dating to between 675-600 BCE. These included an opulent residence (OC1/Residence), a multi-functional industrial space (OC2/Workshop), and a building that may have served the community's religious needs (OC3/Tripartite)¹.

These buildings were destroyed in a fire that swept across the plateau at the end of the 7th century BCE and were replaced by a single, massive edifice. This later building consisted of four wings, each sixty meters in length, surrounding a central, colonnaded courtyard. Recent excavation west of the plateau upon which these monumental buildings were constructed has revealed the presence of a non-elite community, presumably living with and supporting the needs of Poggio Civitate's aristocratic rulers².

Local carving of bone and antler has been evident at Poggio Civitate since the excavation's earliest years, and the large volume of carved ivory, bone and antler objects recovered from the floor of the site's Orientalizing period elite residence (OC1/Residence) hints at a local capacity for the production of such objects³. Ultimately, the excavation of OC2/Workshop, with evidence of numerous forms of manufacturing and production, conclusively demonstrated significant local capacity for the production of any number of different types of commodities, carved bone and antler among them⁴.

The evidence for the production of carved bone and antler objects in OC2/Workshop is considerable⁵. In areas immediately outside and within the eastern portion of

¹ For a review of the nomenclature associated with these structures, see NIELSEN - TUCK 2001, pp. 37-44.

² TUCK - HUNTSMAN - KREINDLER 2013; TUCK 2014.

³ PHILLIPS 1968, p. 122. Phillips initially speculated that the recovered finished bone and ivory plaques served a medicinal function. Later, with the discovery of hundreds of additional examples as well as other elements of partially cut and worked bone and antler he came to view these as indicative of local production in such items. See NIELSEN 1983; NIELSEN 1984; E. O. NIELSEN - K. M. PHILLIPS, in *Case e palazzi d'Etruria*, p. 94.

⁴ TUCK 2014.

⁵ NIELSEN 1995.

the building, excavators recovered hundreds of specimens of partially cut, planed or otherwise worked bone and antler along with a similar number of completed plaques and inlays. Some specimens show clear indications of partial completion or tool marks such as saws and drills (see section on Manufacturing).

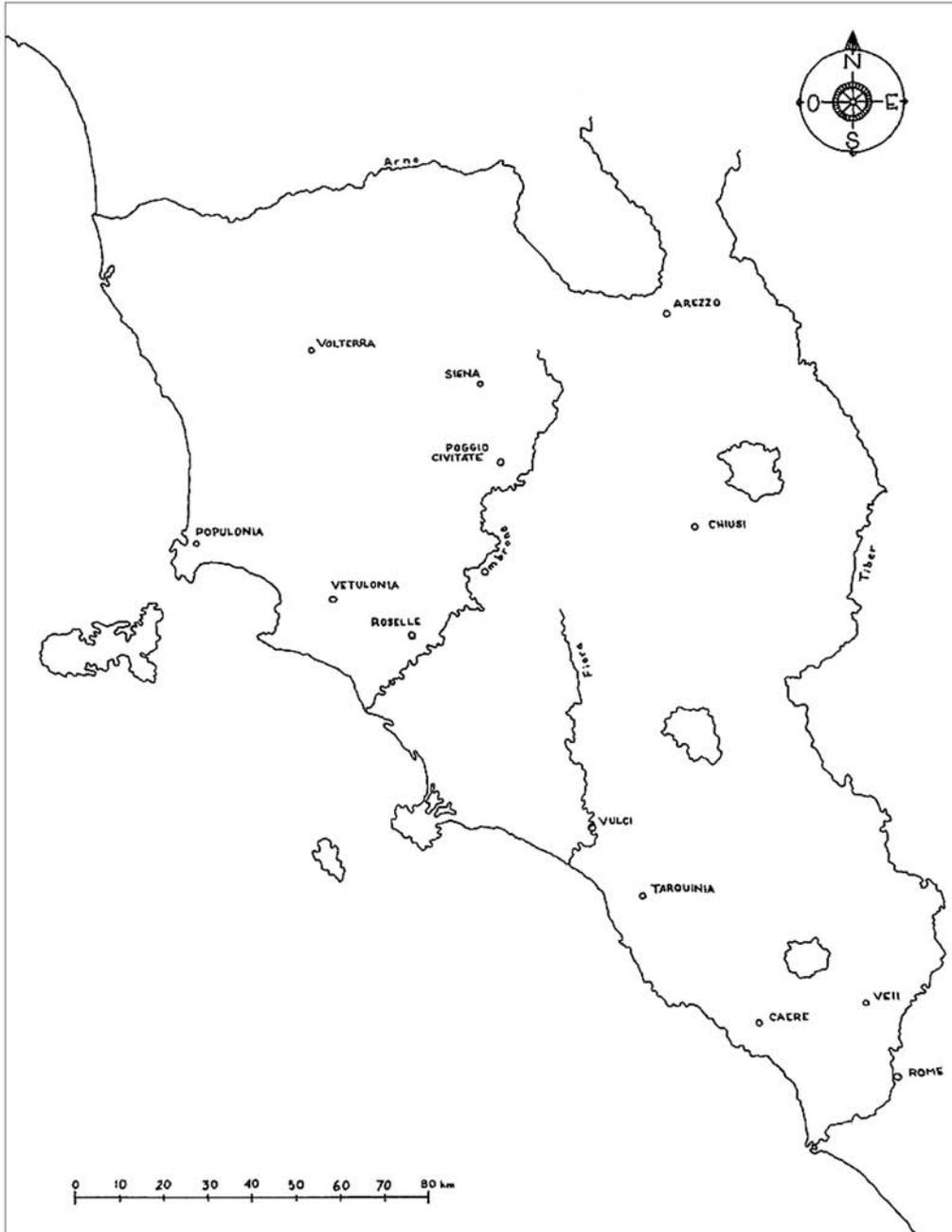


fig. 1 - Regional map of Tuscany with major Etruscan sites.

During the 2007 excavation season at Poggio Civitate, a small, skillfully worked bone head (PC20070199)⁶ was recovered from an archaeological context relating to this phase of occupation (*fig. 2*). The fineness in execution is not without a significant corpus of local comparanda. Given that the evidence from OC2/Workshop overwhelmingly demonstrates local carving of bone and antler and that some examples of similar figural carvings were recovered within the workshop's environs, it seems reasonable to conclude that this bone head was produced at Poggio Civitate and probably within OC2/Workshop itself. Based on the head's technical and formal qualities, we may surmise that it once formed part of a larger work assembled from multiple media.

DESCRIPTION (*tav. XI a-c*)

The top of the head begins just below what would be the hairline and has a smooth brow. While the eyebrows are not explicitly rendered, there are two symmetrical, broadly arched ridges that form a V at the bridge of the nose and extend to frame the eyes. The bridge of the nose is slightly indented and continues the angle of the brow. The nose is straight and aquiline, the bridge even in thickness, and it terminates at a rounded tip. The nostrils are articulated on the exterior by short incisions, and the underside of the nose is a perfect triangle, divided in half by a ridge and marked with two indented ovoid nostrils. The eyes are almond-shaped and clearly outlined with upper and lower lids of equal thickness. Either irises or pupils may be indicated as well, though it is difficult to discern given the mottled color of the material. The face is fullest at the defined cheekbones, then tapers inward toward the jawline. The lips are very full and straight, appearing taut at the corners as they indent into the cheeks. There is a fairly deep recession below the bottom lip before the chin protrudes sharply, maintaining the same straightness of the mouth, and the underside of the chin is slightly puffy. Below is a flattened, thin segment of bone that tapers in width toward a break edge, representing part of the neck.

In terms of its technical qualities, the rear surface of the fragment has been flattened, and the center core has been drilled out vertically, probably for the purpose of doweling onto another object or surface. The hollow displays parallel, regular arched lines, indicating the use of a drill, and measures approximately 14.01 × 6.05 mm. In the center of the area immediately under the top of the fragment where the drilling stopped, there is a pointed notch. The implement used to drill into the back of the object, therefore, had a small, sharp tip. This notch extends 1.93 mm beyond the rest of the hollow. The flat edges on either side of the hollow range in width, from 2.97 mm (at the top) to 1.62 mm (at the bottom). The fragment is thickest through the forehead, but the thickness from the back edge (without the hollow) and through the nose of the face is 11.38 mm.

⁶ Catalogued artifacts at Poggio Civitate are each assigned a unique 8-digit inventory number based on the year in which they were recovered. The complete, fully-searchable catalogue of objects excavated from 1966 to the present is available online at either www.poggiocivitate.org or through <http://opencontext.org/>.

After excavation the head was restored from five fragments, all of which joined, using B-72 adhesive. The surfaces are very smooth, well-laminated, and mottled in color in accordance with the material, along with scratches, cracks and wear.

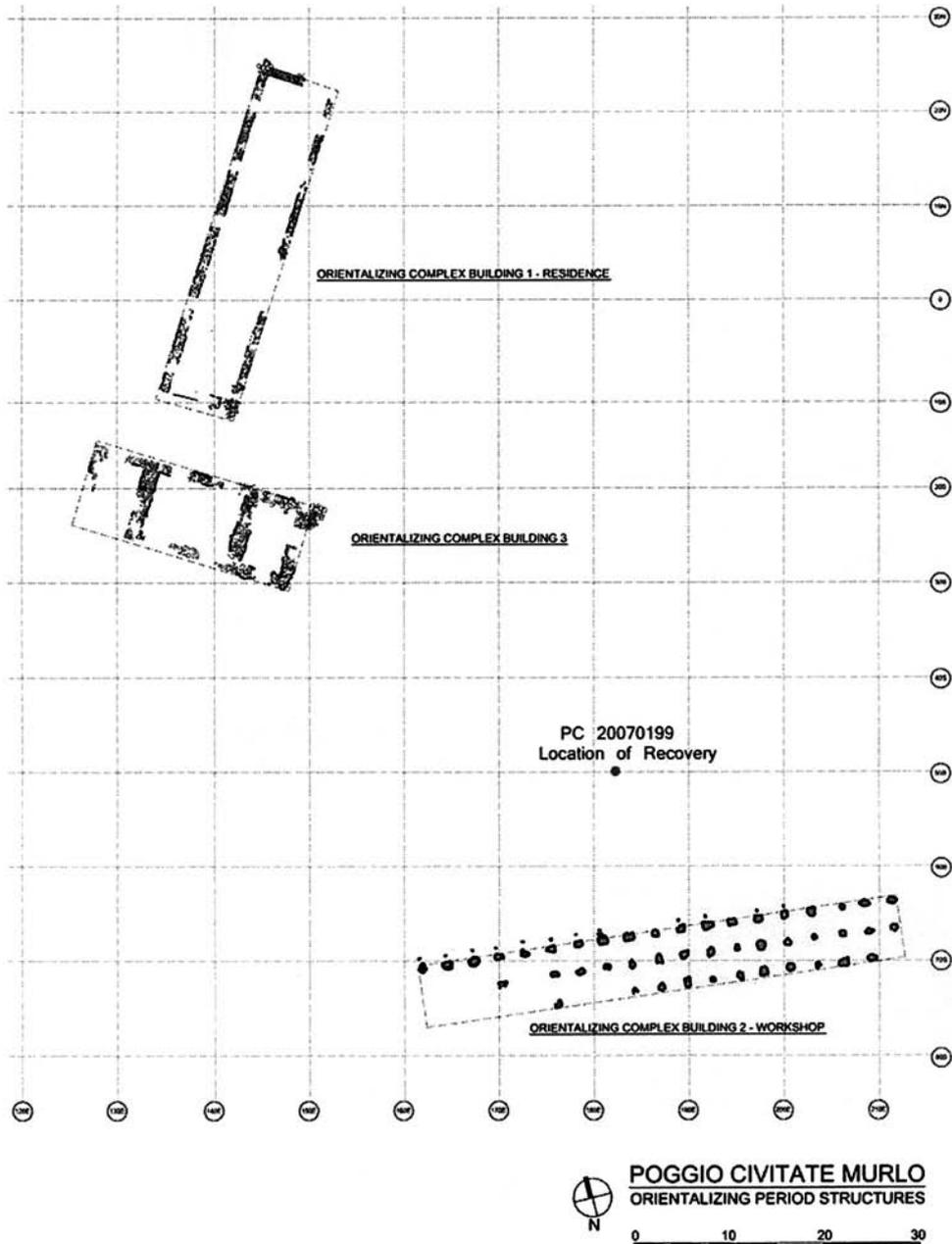


fig. 2 - Plan of Orientalizing period structures with findspot of PC20070199.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT AND DATE

This bone inlay was recovered from an excavation unit designated as T47 (Tesoro Trench 47) in Locus 18, a stratum immediately above the functional surface of OC2/Workshop's floor and immediate environs. Additional finds from this locus include a spindle whorl⁷, ceramics with slip, iron and bronze slag, and terracotta fragments. Catalogued finds include several rocchetti⁸, bronze objects⁹, and bucchero ceramics of Orientalizing typology, all materials suggesting this locus and the materials recovered within it were originally associated with the industrial production of OC2/Workshop¹⁰. The soil in this archaeological context was described as a heavily carbonized and dark brown, mottled with black, white, orange, and red from carbon, limestone, and terracotta inclusions. The excavator determined that these loci were likely layers formed during the leveling of the site after the destruction of the Orientalizing period complex at the end of the seventh century BCE. Therefore it is reasonable to say that the bone face dates to the late seventh century or earlier, firmly in the Orientalizing period phase of Poggio Civitate's development (circa 675-600 BCE)¹¹.

BONE AND IVORY MANUFACTURING AT POGGIO CIVITATE

Worked bone fragments in various stages of production, from very rough pieces to fully finished objects, are found at Poggio Civitate, along with the relative consistency in their technical and aesthetic qualities, indicate a robust industry at the site. The drilling visible on the reverse of the head is identical to the clear drill holes present on other highly finished objects, such as ivory finials with partially drilled holes (PC19710637, PC19710667) (*tav. XI d-e*), and decorative handle fragments, each with a half hole down the center like this bone head (PC19790192) (*tav. XII a*). Additionally, there are fragments of bone and antler that may have been used as 'blanks' for either testing a drill or producing small elements for inlays (PC19760181, PC20070077) (*tav. XII c-d, b*). The full diameter of the drilled holes and spacing between the drill point and rings within the holes are relatively consistent among these artifacts.

A few additional examples of carved figural objects similar to the bone head were recovered in the area of OC2/Workshop, although not in the same quantity as the plaques and inlays. A sphinx produced from an element of antler (PC19790180) (*tav. XII e-f*) with clear indications of reworking was found immediately north and outside the building's eastern extent in a deposit of a considerable number of other broken ele-

⁷ PC inv. 20070276.

⁸ See PC inv. 20070163, 20070139, 20070116, 20070109, 20070230, and 20070147.

⁹ See PC inv. 20070214, 20070222, 20070219, and 20070145.

¹⁰ See PC inv. 20070125 and 20070120.

¹¹ TUCK - NIELSEN 2008.

ments of plaques and inlays. While the rendering of this sphinx is somewhat clumsier than that of PC20070199, the eyes are notably similar. One additional fragment of a plaque carved in the form of a human figure in profile preserves portions of the head and neck, PC19790181 (*tav. XIII a-b*). Curiously, a portion of a guilloche pattern visible on the plaque's reverse suggests that this piece was in the process of being reworked when it was discarded.

COMPOSITION AND MULTIPLE MEDIA IN ETRUSCAN BONE, ANTLER, AND IVORY CARVING

The form of PC20070199 indicates that the preserved head was merely a portion of an original composition. The thin tab below the chin is not modeled in a manner suggestive of a neck. Instead, this projecting element appears to have slotted into another, now missing, rendering of the neck and body. Moreover, the upper portion of the head is planed cleanly through the upper forehead. No attempt is made to represent hair or a headdress of any form, even though the skill employed to render the face would clearly allow such detail. Instead, we presume this element of the composition was rendered in another material, now lost.

This form of modular composition is seen elsewhere at Poggio Civitate, as in PC19710102 (*tav. XIII d*), an ivory plaque in the form of a gorgon that was recovered on the floor of OC1/Residence¹². The rendering of this plaque also exhibits an exceptionally high level of skill, and the representation of the eyes of the gorgon is notably similar to that of PC20070199. Indeed, given the similar form and execution of details on both objects, it is inviting to speculate the same artisan was responsible for both, but certainty on such a point is obviously impossible.

Like PC20070199, the upper portion of the gorgon's head is cut and planed cleanly, suggesting other elements such as hair and snakes would have been added in other media. In fact, some slight greenish discoloration on right side of the gorgon's face might suggest it was in contact with oxidizing bronze, perhaps the medium employed for the now lost additional details of the composition.

The combination of organic material such as bone or ivory with added metal details is not common, but it does have parallel in central Italy during this period. From Marsiliana d'Albegna's Banditella Necropolis come examples of ivory objects complemented by additional gold ornamentation. An ivory statuette of a frontally-posed, nude female figure was originally laminated in part with gold foil¹³. From the same grave, excavators recovered additional statuettes of stylized felines, two of which were constructed with eyes made from small gold buttons inlaid into the surface of the ivory (*tav. XIII c*)¹⁴.

Manufacturing that employs similar combinations of media has precedents in various Iron Age Etruscan forms of production. Metals such as bronze, iron, or tin were

¹² PHILLIPS 1972, p. 253.

¹³ MINTO 1921, pp. 86-87; CELUZZA - CIANFERONI 2010, p. 161.

¹⁴ CELUZZA - CIANFERONI 2010, p. 161.

often applied to the surfaces of biconical cinerary urns to render or enhance decorative patterns. For example, Tarquinia's Tomb 47 from the Le Rose cemetery contained several vessels with this decorative strategy (*tav. XIII f*)¹⁵. The technique continues to be employed into the late Iron Age, such as on a late 8th or early 7th century BCE pouring vessel from Caere (*tav. XIII e*) and it remains in use into the 7th century with silver leaf applied to some of the earliest bucchero ceramic manufacturing¹⁶.

Unfortunately, most of the composition associated with PC20070199 is lost today. However, what does survive of the original object reflects the work of a practiced and accomplished artisan capable of producing materials of notable refinement within the environment of Poggio Civitate's OC2/Workshop. Although incomplete, PC20070199's form coupled with the incorporation of different types of media provides a glimpse into the complexity and creativity of artisans of this period, commissioned by their patrons to create objects of notable sophistication in the service of an emergent aristocratic language of power and authority.

THERESA HUNTSMAN - ANTHONY TUCK

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¹⁵ BURANELLI 1983, pp. 52-55.

¹⁶ RAMAGE 1970, p. 17; RASMUSSEN 1979, p. 128.

TAVOLE



a) PC20070199, Frontal view; *b)* PC20070199, Profile view; *c)* PC20070199, Back view;
d) PC19710637, Ivory finial fragments; *e)* PC19710667, Ivory finial fragment (3 views).



a) PC19790192, Burned ivory handle fragments; *b)* PC20070077, Antler 'blank' with drill holes; *c)* PC19760181, Antler 'blank', side 1; *d)* PC19760181, Antler 'blank', side 2; *e)* PC19790180, Bone sphinx, side 1; *f)* PC19790180, Bone sphinx, side 2.



a) PC19790181, Plaque with human head in profile; b) PC19790181, Plaque with human head in profile, reverse; c) Ivory feline with gold eyes from Marsiliana d'Albegna; d) PC19710102, Gorgon face plaque; e) Pouring vessel from Caere; f) Biconical urn with metal inlay, Tomb 47, Le Rose cemetery, Tarquinia.