

STUDIES IN MEDITERRANEAN ARCHAEOLOGY  
VOL. CXLIX

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## FROM INVISIBLE TO VISIBLE

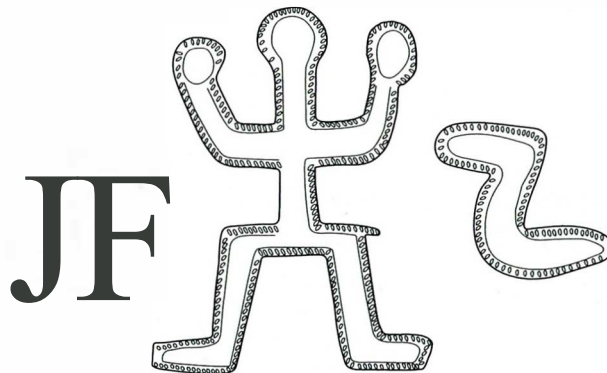
### New Methods and Data for the Archaeology of Infant and Child Burials in Pre-Roman Italy and Beyond

edited by

Jacopo Tabolli

Maria Bonghi Jovino  
Tarquinia. Infant burial in the  
inhabited area: a short reappraisal

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Cover image: Spoleto. Piazza d'Armi. Tomb 11 (infant, 2-4 years). Detail of a shoe-shaped askos of brown impasto with a depiction of the 'Mistress of animals' (after a drawing by J. Weidig)

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# Tarquinia. Infant burials in the inhabited area: a short reappraisal

Maria Bonghi Jovino

## Abstract

*The first regular and systematic explorations at the Etruscan town of Tarquinia (Civita) took place at the beginning of the 1980s. Among the archaeological finds, the discovery of a great number of infant and child burials, dating to the earliest phases of the settlement, in a single specific area appeared as an anomaly, when compared to what is known especially in Latium, where infants and children were buried under the roofs of the houses. This chapter proposes a new methodology and an interdisciplinary approach to these case studies, looking at the significance of this evidence, while avoiding the imposition of personal biases.*

## 3.2.1 Introduction

Regular and systematic explorations of the ancient town of Tarquinia (**Fig. 3.2.1**) began for the first time in the early 1980s. At this time most of the evidence regarding the Etruscans came from cemeteries, and much less was known about inhabited areas. Therefore, in the case of Tarquinia, excavations immediately focused on the urban area (**Fig. 3.2.2**).

The valuable archaeological evidence brought to light in the residential zones included the discovery of an institutional and sacra area (*area sacra*), where a large number of burials were identified, and this appeared to be an anomaly compared to the other Etruscan towns. This area had a distinct public function.

The earliest findings brought to light so far in this area date back to the end of the 10th century BC. Following this period, several different sectors - labelled by the excavators with Greek letters - gradually developed for different purposes. In the early 7th century BC, a 'monumental complex' was erected, consisting of a central roofed temple/altar (*edificio beta*) flanked by two uncovered precincts (**Fig. 3.2.3**) (Bonghi Jovino 2010).

In the *area alpha* and around the *edificio beta* all burials followed the ritual of inhumation and there were hardly any grave goods (except in the case of individuals 5 and 6, see below). Bodies were often laid

directly on the ground rather than in a trench. This is an unusual practice compared with contemporary Etruscan burial customs.

An analysis of these burials has been extensively conducted in the past from various perspectives and by adopting methodologies used in the fields of archaeology, bioarchaeology and the history of religion. Following the development of current research trends, various interpretations and problems have emerged, making it essential to draw attention to the highlights of the research.

## 3.2.2 A 'guide' to infant burials at Tarquinia

Not all the cases regarding different periods will be discussed in this chapter, but only the individuals mentioned below. During the excavation each individual was assigned more than one inventory number, according to the laboratory and digging lists (see Chiaramonte Treré 1986, 1987, 1995; Fornaciari & Mallegni 1986, 1987; Bonghi Jovino & Chiaramonte Treré 1997: 95; and most recently de Grummond 2016: 159-165) (Figs 3.2.4-3.2.5).

**Individual 2** (562 = 180A) had a fairly complete skeleton and was a foetus at term or perhaps an infant of a few months old. This individual was interred without grave offerings at the end of the 8th century BC (Orientalising Period). The orientation is always uncertain (the orientation is not indicated in **Figure 3.2.6**, but merely the general location of the newborn).

**Individual 3** (563 = 180B) had a poorly-preserved skeleton. It could have been a foetus at term or a newborn, and was buried at the end of the 8th century BC.

**Individual 4** (564 = 180C) was lacking its head and was most probably a foetus at term or a newborn, buried at the end of the 8th century BC.

**Individual 5** (226A): only tiny fragments of bone survived, revealing that the infant was a nursling. This individual was found in the northern courtyard of the 'monumental complex' in a small

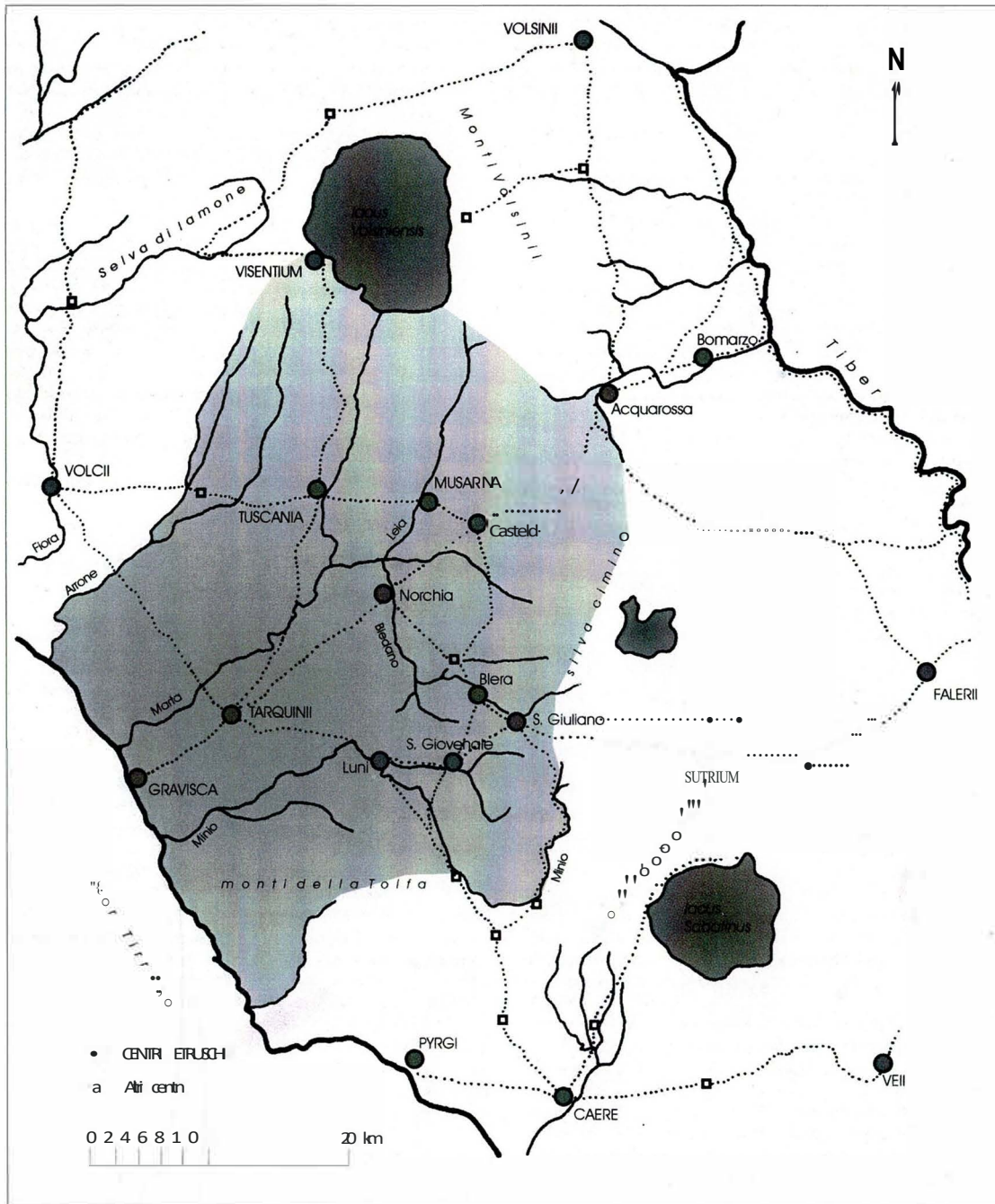


Figure 3.2.1. Tarquinia. Map of the city and its territory (prepared by the author)

pit (351) against the wall of the *edificio beta* above and in the same position as pit 349 (Fig. 3.2.5). Pit 351 contained a few burnt bones, earth and small pieces of charcoal together with fragments of *impasto ceramic* and a miniature skyphos in *bucchero*. This would lead us to suppose that a blood sacrifice may have been carried out. This burial took place in the first half of the 6th century BC. The shape of the ceramic would also suggest the presence of a ritual.

**Individui 6** (59A/60) was a newborn and its head was missing. The offerings included two Etrusco-

Corinthian plates, jars, one miniature cup in *impasto*, one Etrusco-Corinthian geometric cup and a complete *bucchero* service. The votive burial offerings found in the tomb could have been for a sacrifice or for a funerary banquet. This individual was buried around the mid-6th century BC.

### 3.2.3 Archaeological evidence and relative interpretation

The most important data can be summarised as follows:

- The small number of burials occurred over a



Figure 3.2.2. Tarquinia. Pian di Civita 'Area Sacra' (photo by the author)

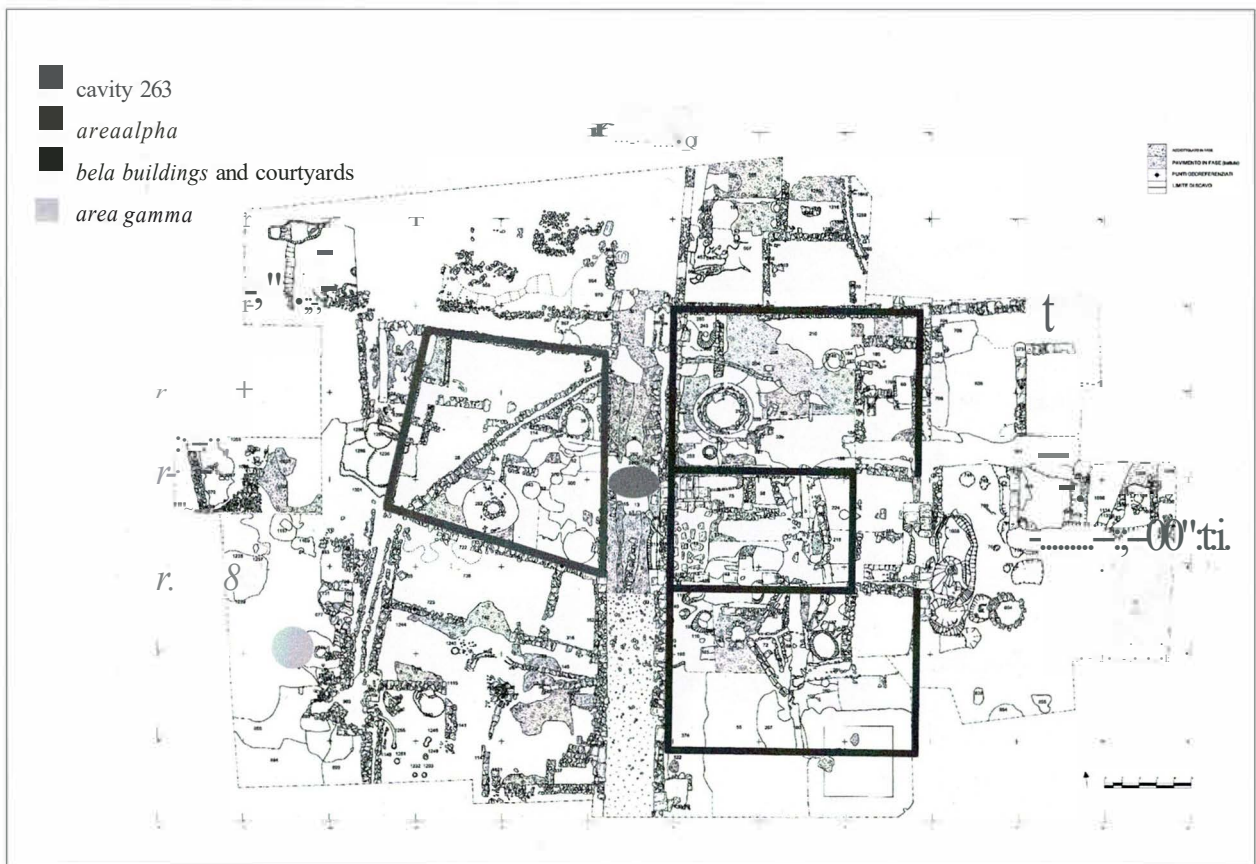


Figure 3.2.3. Tarquinia. Pian di Civita. Plan of the 'Area Sacra' (prepared by the author)



Figure 3.2.4. Tarquinia. Pian di Civita. The votive deposit 349 above burial of individual 5 (prepared by the author)

- period of approximately 200 years.
- There is an absence so far of proper grave goods.
- The deposition of infants is always located in uncovered sectors. This is the case for all the individuals found.
- Most of the evidence can be related to a propitiation ritual (as can be seen for infant burials and the fact that the same objects were found in graves 5 and 6).

The difficulty in observing differences between the several levels of archaeological evidence (religious, social and cult-related) has already been noted (see for instance Iaia 1995: 249). Specifically, looking at the infant burials in Tarquinia, the most significant achievement is recognition of the fact that a certain set of funerary rules existed. Any kind of offering or grave good would appear not to have been allowed, whereas propitiation ceremonies were probably performed for the reasons indicated above (Bonghi Jovino 2007-2008: 788).

In the course of the research we have gone into the problems of:

- Whether we are dealing or not with rituals.
- The type of ritual, whether 'secular' or 'sacred' (sacer).
- The existence of blood sacrifices while, in other

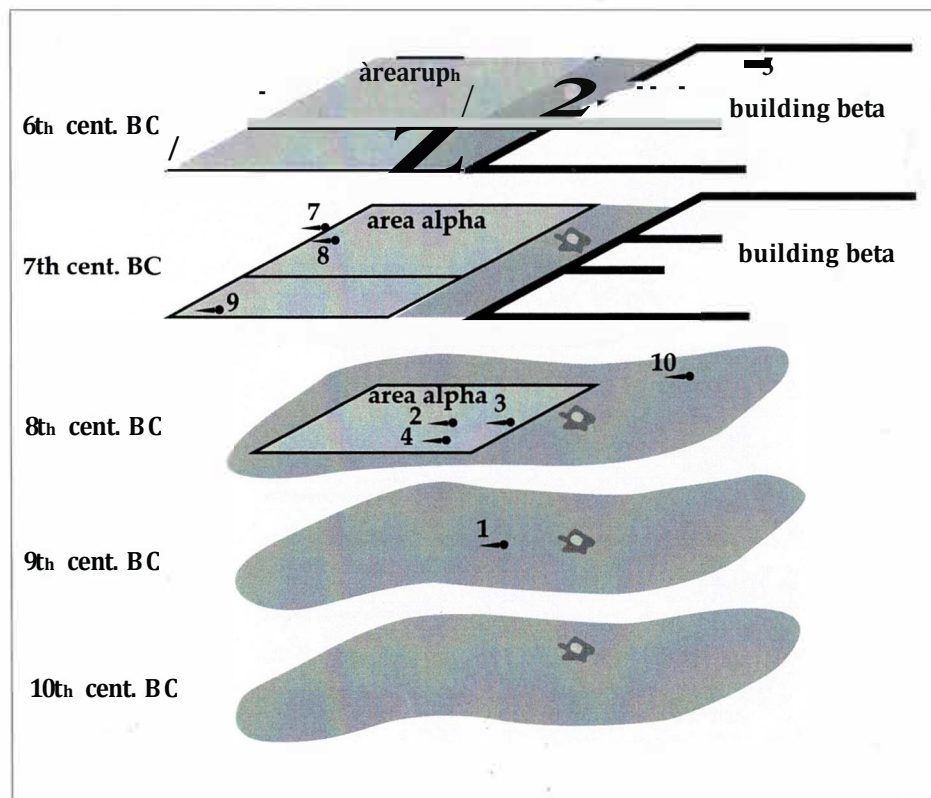


Figure 3.2.5. Tarquinia. Pian di Civita. Diagram of the burials (indicated by Arabic numerals), with indications of the century in which they were interred (indicated by Roman numerals) (after Bonghi Jovino 2007-2008)



cases, sacrifices are simply defined as 'sacred' following the correct etymology of *sacrum Jacere*. This difference implies that, on each separate occasion, care has to be taken in distinguishing which evidence relates to the former and which to the latter.

- The intention, and its significance, of the family burying the infants.

As to the first point, the depositions covered a long period, during which the same types of action were taken. Such evidence suggests a specific ritual practice. Clearly, these practices are key ritual items.

Concerning the second point, the location of the depositions in a sacred area represents a characteristic element in support of the sacred purpose of burials. It is impossible to agree (Bonghi Jovino 2017) with the identification of these burials as *suggrundaria* (as suggested by Becker 2007: 288).

From the very beginning, excavators were mainly interested in the practice of funerary depositions in an inhabited area in Mediterranean societies, where different trends have been recognised. In the case of Tarquinia, we thought that infants were offered to the deities in order to gain divine protection (Chiaramonte Treré 1986: 178-179).

In the following years, the continuation of excavations confirmed our interpretation: 'We are facing a well-defined scenario and therefore our interpretation should focus on the propitiatory aspect of the ritual. This is confirmed by the presence of a newborn (individui 5) buried alongside the northern wall of the *edificio beta* together with the remains of a libation ritual and individui 6, both of the Archaic period' (Bonghi Jovino 2007-2008: 783). A new suggestion has recently been made: the possibility that rituals of divination could have taken place in the '*area sacra*' (de Grummond 2016: 151-159). Thus, among the most outstanding results of the excavations, we can now discuss new perspectives regarding the evidence of cult rituals, such as the practice of human sacrifice and the social development of the community.

### 3.2.4 Conclusions

Some final observations can now be made. The concep

of sacrifice can be linked to different 'experiences'. Looking at the *area sacra*, in my opinion two categories of burials can be identified: the first, where infants are offered in order to obtain divine protection, and the second, relating to rituals linked to the foundation of sacred buildings (Chiaramonte Treré 1986: 180-181). Based on the archaeological evidence, the hypothesis of newborn blood sacrifices for these reasons probably has to be dismissed. In defining and redefining the situation regarding infant sacrifice, the practice of offering dead infants to the deities for protection would seem to be more probable since we can only assume the existence of a single blood sacrifice case (and this is individui 5) (Bonghi Jovino 2018).

The possible intentionality aspect of these burials could also be explored. This question is related to how much religious feeling and emotion may have influenced society between the 8th and 6th centuries BC. I presume that, in order to understand such a complex situation, researchers expert in sociology must be involved so as to develop a new exploration of the '*invisible*'. My feeling is that invisibility is not a scientific taboo even if recent archaeological studies, with some exceptions, in most cases have not dealt with the question of invisibility and its underlying significance.

On the other hand, invisibility is connected with emotion. It should be mentioned that various study traditions hold that emotional responses are incompatible with logical thought proper, although this view has been widely criticised. Debate on this subject is far-reaching, and at this time it is not possible for me to go into the details of individual opinions I have discussed in other contributions still being printed. I would merely refer to S. Tarlow's publication (1992) where this scholar covers the more important trends of thought and emphasises emotional significance.

In my opinion, research on emotion and consequently on invisibility pursued according to appropriate logical criteria will make it possible to identify a point of convergence between human gestures and activities documented by archaeological evidence, evidence that can on no account be disregarded.

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