
The archaeological remains of most Roman provinces have been the subject of scholarly interest and research since at least the middle of the last century, and in countries such as Britain, France, Germany or Switzerland their study has long been recognized as an academic discipline on its own. Yet, in Italy itself the province remained practically unexplored. Its recent 'discovery' is due to a far-reaching reorientation of archaeological research that has taken place only a short time ago.

Traditionally, Roman archaeology—like Classical archaeology in general—had conceived itself in essentially art-historical terms, dealing preferably with works of 'great art', with the *opera nobilia* that in their majority had been created in the capital, by highly skilled craftsmen and artists, commissioned by members of the ruling class (whether in official or private function). This concept never remained unchallenged, but it is above all since the war and more particularly during the last decade or so that it has come under increasingly fierce attack and that a new approach has gained almost general acceptance. It is characterized by a decidedly historical (rather than art-historical) orientation and considers archaeological remains as part of a cultural totality in which socio-economic and political factors play no minor role. 'Rome—*The Centre of Power*’ is the title R. Bianchi Bandinelli gave his main work on Roman archaeology, published in 1970. With this new concept, research of Classical archaeologists began to move into hitherto much neglected fields such as the pre- and proto-history of Rome and Latium, the art produced for the middle and lower classes or, to revert to our starting point, Rome’s provincial hinterland.

For the students of the last, the international colloquium on Central Italy from the middle of the second to the end of the first century B.C. held in Göttingen in 1974 provided a first opportunity to take stock of the results so far obtained; its proceedings, *Hellenismus in Mittelitalien*, were published as the 97th volume of the *Göttinger Abhandlungen* in 1976 and have since given research in this field further impetus. In the preface (which is, in fact, an epilogue to the colloquium), P. Zanker points out the wealth of archaeological material that exists, almost completely ignored, in many towns of Central Italy and emphasizes the need and importance of making these remains known (without, one may add, the need for excavation). Sylvia Diebner’s study, originally written as a PhD thesis under Zanker’s supervision is a first—and most promising—response to this postulate. Her aim is
to take a complete inventory of the Roman stone monuments from the two small townships Aesernia (modern Isernia) and Venafrum (Venafro) and to determine their cultural characteristics on the basis of this evidence. That she fully succeeds in achieving this end is due as much to her scrupulously careful method in the description and analysis of the material as to her admirable erudition. To give an adequate idea of the many-sidedness of her study is therefore beyond the scope of a short review.

One may wonder at first, why D. deals, in the one book, with two different sites, but it is soon clear that this bi-partite procedure is essential to her dialectical approach. Methodologically speaking, the two form one, being complementary and antithetical to each other at the same time. For instance: Aesernia’s monuments date mainly to the period ca. 50 B.C. to ca. 50 A.D.; Venafrum’s belong by and large to the first century A.D.; in the workshops of the former imported marble rarely replaces the local limestone—which is only used for funerary monuments in Venafrum. For each site D. gives first an introduction (pp. 21-26; 59-67) that includes a description of the geographical situation, a short account of the history and a survey of the archaeological remains, their proveniences and present whereabouts. In a second chapter, entitled Kulturhistorische Aussagen (pp. 27-56; 68-91), the monuments are examined in order to define their function in historical terms. This includes a discussion of the various categories to which they belong and of the respective clientele, as well as an analysis of their style and their iconography. A general summary is given in a very brief third chapter (pp. 95-97) that precedes the second part of the book (pp. 99-286) in which the material itself is presented and which therefore could have been placed more appropriately at the beginning. It is again in two parts and consists of a truly exemplary catalogue raisonné (first the monuments from Aesernia: Is 1—92, then those from Venafrum: Vf 1-85). For each piece, the factual data are given in small print (present whereabouts, provenience, material, measurements, state of preservation, bibliography). This is followed by a detailed description and a concise, most informative commentary. All but two minor pieces are illustrated and save for figs 141, 143 and 162, the more than 200 photographs are of good if not excellent quality (most are due to C. Rossa from the German Archaeological Institute at Rome). To have them in a separate volume is, of course, particularly handy. The same care and thoroughness which characterize the study as a whole also distinguish the indices with which it concludes. (Apart from the main epigraphical index, complemented by a concordance with the CIL and H. Dessau’s Inscriptiones Latiae Selectae, there is an index of the present whereabouts of the pieces and a third one for the proveniences.)

The two towns lie, about 20 km apart, on tributaries of the upper Volturno, in the lowland framed to the west by the Mainarde mountains, to
the east by the Matese range. But while Venafrum, situated practically on the spot where the modern provinces of Latium, Campania and Molise meet, is easily reached from the *Via Latina* (or, in modern terms, from the *Autostrada del Sole*), Aesernia is on the road which leads from Apulia to Corfinium and Pescara (ancient Aternum) on the Adriatic coast. Little is known about the early history of this Samnite stronghold. In 295 B.C., it was occupied by Roman troops and in 263 a Latin colony was imposed on it. Its lay-out has survived in the plan of the medieval city and some remains of its main temple, built over by the cathedral, are still visible. In the Social War, Aesernia became the insurgent capital after the fall of Bovianum in 89 B.C. and was destroyed by Sulla in 80 B.C. (see E. T. Salmon, *Samnium and the Samnites*, Cambridge 1967, 387 f.). The setting-up of a municipium after the war therefore came close to a new foundation. This was followed by a comparatively prosperous period, but it did not last: from the period of Claudius onward the city appears to have existed on the fringes. Yet, it was never completely abandoned and some of its ancient monuments remained visible through the ages—so for instance the four honorary statues of Augustan date re-used in medieval times to decorate the four corners of the so-called *Androne* (Is 1-2; 5-6). As early as 1492 scholarly attention was drawn to Aesernia by an inscription, and in 1848 R. Garrucci published his *Storia d’Isernia* which remains fundamental, together with Th. Mommsen’s inventory of the inscriptions for the *CIL* IX (1883). But despite the creation of an ‘*Antiquario Comunale*’ in 1934 the archaeological heritage remained largely unnoticed—and it is precisely thanks to this heritage that D. succeeds in painting a much more vivid picture of ‘our small town’. The funeral monuments in particular prove to be a most valuable source of information, and what had hitherto been a rather dull, abstract account becomes suddenly a most enjoyable stage play, with the *dramatis personae* strikingly resembling those familiar from ancient comedies: the boastful soldier (eg. Is 20-21), the money-conscious freedmen (with their peculiar funerary urns in the shape of strong-boxes: Is 41 ff.) or the funny pub owner. The gravestone which the latter set for himself, *L. Calidius Eroticus*, and for his companion whose name, *Fannia Voluptas* leads one to assume that the two formed an ideal couple, is decorated with a relief representing a landlady settling up with a traveller whose mule takes up more than half the picture (Is 62). Above it, an inscription goes as follows:

‘Landlady, let’s reckon up.’ — ‘You had wine for one *sextarius*, bread for one *as* and meat for two *asses.*’ — ‘That’s right.’ — ‘Eight *asses* for the girl.’ — ‘Alright.’ — ‘The straw for the mule comes to two *asses.*’ — ‘That damn mule is going to drive me to the wall!’

The style of the relief which illustrates this priceless story is characteristic of all stone sculpture made in Aesernia. The three protagonists are carved out
with just sufficient realistic features for them to be recognizable as woman, traveller and mule, one standing beside the other. No attempt has been made to depict the space that surrounds the three figures, nor has any attention been paid to the aesthetic aspects: the scene shows no sign of any conscious composition, the figures defy any rule of proportion both in themselves and in relation to each other. And while decorative details do not matter to the sculptor, he is at pains to express himself clearly and unequivocally. Thus he gives the female figure large hands with clearly spread fingers to emphasize that she is counting; the man in front of her is characterized as a traveller by his *paenula* (see F. Kolb, Römische Mäntel, *RM* 80, 1973, 87 f.)—and the fact that he has already pulled its hood over his head indicates that he is leaving—while the importance of the mule is made evident by its enormous size. With its predilection for narrative details this style clearly reflects the dedicators' desire to be easily understood. The customers of the local workshops belonged practically without exception to the middle class which owed its existence to the creation of an urban society after the Social War and which at the same time became the decisive factor in the romanisation of the township. With the moderate affluence to which it rose in the first century B.C. came a growing self-awareness which in turn led to an increasing need for self-representation.

Venafrum offers a similar and at the same time distinctly different picture. As in Aesernia's case, little is known about its political history: member of the Samnite League till the early third century B.C., annexed by the Romans probably after the Pyrrhic war, a colony under Augustus (belonging to *Regio I*), badly damaged in the earthquake of 346 A.D. The archaeological remains therefore again constitute the most important source of information despite the fact that most of them are chance finds (many of them in private hands, as Venafro has no museum). They show that here, too, it was a political act that caused far-reaching cultural changes. In Aesernia, the romanisation process started with the establishment of a *municipium* after the Social War; in Venafrum, the change from a rural community to an urban society comes with the creation of the *Colonia Augusta Iulia*. Apart from an imported female head dated to ca. 100 B.C. there is no stone sculpture before the age of Augustus. The relative prosperity which the colony appears to have enjoyed throughout the first century A.D. was due not least to its geographical situation, and the proximity of the *Via Latina* certainly accounts for the fact that Venafrum's sculptors and masons make a far less provincial impression than their confrères in Aesernia. Pieces such as the female statue Vf 7 (of the *Venus Genetrix* type), the magnificent Claudian portrait statue Vf 9 or the architectural fragments Vf 60 ff. from the 'Terme di S. Aniello' are obviously the products of a society which had close contacts with the capital and which
tried to keep pace with the developments that were taking place there. What, one wonders, could have been the reaction of our muleteer from Aesernia coming to Venafrum to see a spectacle in the amphitheatre and standing in front of the marble replica of the *Venus Landolina*?

*J-P. Descoëttes*


Among the monuments that may strike the visitor to the National Museum in the Baths of Diocletian at Rome more by their number than by their artistic quality are the funeral altars and cippi, most of them lined up along the walls of the four aisles in the magnificent ‘Chiostro di Michelangelo’. A number of them had been included in W. Altmann’s *Die römischen Grabaltäre der Kaiserzeit* (Berlin 1905), some have been illustrated in M. Honroth, *Stadtrömische Girlanden. Ein Versuch zur Entwicklungsgeschichte römischer Ornamentik* (Wien 1971), but most have remained unpublished—apart from short descriptions in the main guides to the collection (R. Paribeni, *Le Terme di Diocleziano e il Museo Nazionale Romano*, 2nd ed. 1932; S. Aurigemma, *Le Terme di Diocleziano e il Museo Nazionale Romano*, 6th ed. 1970; W. Helbig, *Führer durch die öffentlichen Sammlungen klassischer Altertümer in Rom*, III, 4th ed. 1969) and the inclusion of their inscriptions in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. Yet, these unassuming monuments could provide valuable information about the religious attitudes of the Romans. Their full, adequately illustrated publication would be of unquestionable benefit.

Obviously, it was not C.’s intention to take such a complete inventory. But although she is content with selecting a number of pieces (on grounds of what criteria she does not reveal) her book is a most welcome step in the right direction. A brief introduction on the methods used by the *sculptores* producing such altars and gravestones (pp. 1-3) is followed by an equally brief and no less cursory attempt to define the terms ‘*altare*’, ‘*ara*’ and ‘*cip­pus*’ (pp. 4-6). What precisely distinguishes an ‘*altare ossuario*’ from an ‘*ara ossuario*’ remains, however, unclear (and not only to the reader: see e.g. p. 68 where the two terms are used synonymously); and what is the difference between cinerary urns and nos. 24, 31 and 32 for which the term ‘*cippo ossuario*’ is used?

By far the largest part of C.’s book is taken up by the *catalogue raisonné* which comprises 59 pieces (pp. 7-133). The first 38 are grouped on the basis