Interview with Dr. Orlando Cerasuolo, 2013-2014 IEMA Postdoctoral Fellow

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Dr. Orlando Cerasuolo is currently the Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute for European and Mediterranean Archaeology at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. He received a Master of Arts with honors in Archaeology from Sapienza University of Rome in 2005. He remained at Sapienza University of Rome to conduct his doctoral work on the connection of Etruria with the major Eastern Mediterranean islands earning his Ph.D. in Archaeology in 2011. Dr. Cerasuolo's work focuses on the Etruscans and their interaction with the (Eastern) Mediterranean cultures with an interest in the interconnectedness of the ancient world as well as the illustration and exhibition of archaeological remains in the modern..

What are your current research interests and what projects are you involved in?

Being by nature a very inquiring person, my interests are quite varied and my research has taken different paths over the years. Although my interests are ever changing and expanding, I am always continuing to build on my past experiences.

When I started my undergraduate studies, I already had a passion for the Etruscans; furthermore, I had direct knowledge of several archaeological sites in the area north of Rome, my hometown. However, when I started attending courses, I was positively surprised to have a large variety of teachings to choose. Fortunately the Sapienza University of Rome is one of the largest universities in Italy and the archeology department is among the best in Europe: therefore, the didactic offer ranges from prehistory to the Middle Ages, from Rome to the Near East, from numismatics to technical analysis and excavation methods.

Very early I became interested in the Bronze Age and Iron Age (the so called Protohistory), likely because of the teaching skills of Professor Renato Peroni, who held the chair of the European Protohistory. He was my advisor, and with him I discussed many times the issues of city formation, the progress from scattered villages to the first urban centers. I devoted the two volumes of my thesis to this topic, and it is still at the center of my interests.

After graduation, I returned to my first love. In fact, for my PhD research, supervised by Professors Gilda Bartoloni and Giovanna Bagnasco Gianni, I returned to focus on the Etruscans. My research discussed the oldest phases, say the 8th and 7th century B.C.E, of one of the most important Etruscan cities: Cerveteri, called *Caere* by the Romans. When I started my research, I read Cerveteri was best known for its exceptional princely graves (such as the Regolini-Galassi tomb), but no one seemed to tackle the rest of the population. To me it was crucial to understand how the aristocratic class was formed, and how they were able to gain control and rule the rest of the population. As you see, somehow I had already started to deal with the subject of inequalities, the theme of my project here at IEMA.

My doctorate research also opened me to another perspective, one that perhaps is now a large part of my current interests, the great network of contacts between the various peoples of the Mediterranean. I was in fact convinced by the complex evidence from the Etruscan cities of the importance of these exchanges, both economic and cultural, for the development of ancient civilizations. I was persuaded that in areas like the Mediterranean, where resources are quite abundant, the major factor of development is due to the strong interaction between people of different cultures and traditions. Fortunately, I was able to develop some of these interests last year, during a fellowship at the Italian Archaeological School at Athens (SAIA).

I have not yet spoken of my field work and projects I am involved in. I've always enjoyed field work and perhaps the distance from my beloved territories has been the hardest part of this experience in Buffalo. I have conducted a lot of excavations and surveys; I worked several years as a contract archaeologist, both with the National Archaeological Bureau and private cooperatives, to pay for my university studies. I am proud to be a member of the Veii Project, by Sapienza University of Rome; which involves the excavation of Veii, the Etruscan town closest to Rome. Since 1999 I dug in many parts of the city, and in the necropolis and I have studied the Iron Age and early Orientalizing pottery, as well as Archaic architecture and defensive works. However, since the project has a strong education component, the most important thing I do there is teaching freshmen the rudiments of the archaeological research.

Since 2008, on behalf of the Roman Archaeological Association (GAR), I have been director of an excavation and outreach project, centered on a small but well-preserved Etruscan fortress, called Rofalco, which was destroyed by the Roman army around 280 B.C.E. It is nice to dig there because it is a perfectly preserved site, where the collapsed roofs, which fell after the Roman conquest, directly cover the occupation layers. In addition, since the projects start in 1996, it was designed as a field school for international volunteers, of all ages and from every background, giving the field school a very diverse and mixed character.

The last project I want to talk you about is very important because it sees the collaboration with the University of Buffalo. Together with Professor Steve Dyson and the PhD candidate Erin Warford (and my Italian colleague Luca Pulcinelli) we designed a webGIS project of the ancient territory of Vulci, another major Etruscan city; our main goal is to understand how the organization and perception of the territory changed over time during the Etruscan and Roman period. I'm very proud to announce that our project has been awarded by SPARC (an NSF founded Institute at Arkansas University), and I hope this would be an opportunity for students from Buffalo to come into Italy for intensive field activity.

Whose work has had the strongest influence on your own?

It is not easy to answer this question. In fact, despite having much interest in theoretical debates, I have always been unwilling to place myself into any school of thought or interpretive category.

If I go back to some of my childhood readings, I see they have contributed much to my early education. Texts such as the *Labors of Hercules* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which as a child I read as fairy tales, provided me with a basic level of knowledge of ancient culture and thought. Through other childhood readings as *Journey to the Center of the Earth* by Jules Verne or *The Kon-Tiki Expedition* by Thor Heyerdahl, I developed attention to detail and passion for discovery, factors that still make me enjoy this job.

In a more purely academic side, I owe a lot to my first undergraduate professor, Renato Peroni. He, who passed away in May 2010, was a model of clear teaching, scientific rigor and breadth of vision. I learned a lot from him, both in the field of methodologies and in the area of broad chronological and geographical studies. He was a terrific person who gave a lot of confidence to young scholars.

There are scholars I have not met in person, but I've known only through their writings that ahave influenced me as a scholar. Fernand Braudel, with his work on the Ancient Mediterranean, taught me the value of wide-ranging research, which aims to consider the full evidence in a broad perspective. Colin Renfrew is for me a model of an archaeologist who manages to combine theoretical formulation and field practice, scientific rigor and dissemination. Ian Hodder has the function to always put into question the fixed points on which one lies, with an outstanding narrative capacity and imagination. The list goes on with many other names, Bianchi Bandinelli, John Boardman, Jared Diamond, Henri Duday, Kent Flannery, Cairoli Fulvio Giuliani, Domenico Musti, John B. Ward-Perkins, and many others I can't remember now.

Finally, I am convinced I learn a lot from my colleagues and students, with whom I am constantly working in a very fruitful process of growth.

The Etruscans and pre-Roman Italy tend to be neglected in North America. What led you to study this regrettably understudied time period and culture? What advice would you give to those who wish to study the pre-Roman Italians?

My interest towards the Etruscans came a little by chance and a little by luck.

For me the Etruscans are in my backyard. In fact, if you move just north of Rome, you will soon find the first remains of the Etruscans. Although many people view the Tuscany as the homeland of the Etruscans, as a matter of fact some of the major Etruscan cities, those of the so-called southern Etruria, are located in the Lazio region, north of the river Tiber. The city of Veii, which Rome fought against in its first battles, is now in the suburbs of the capital. Do not forget that the Etruscans greatly contributed to the formation of the same Roman civilization; remember the Etruscan kings of Rome?

Growing up in Rome, I was able to know the history of my territory from an early age. I also had the fortune to start practicing archeology from very young age. I was 11 when I enrolled in a voluntary society, the Roman Archaeological association, with which I started doing surveys, archaeological excavations and simple projects of experimental archeology.

The Etruscans have always interested me. Their wealth, monumental tombs and black pottery (the '*bucchero*') that distinguishes them have always been of great interest, while their unique language, Eastern iconography and intense Mediterranean trade were important elements to understand their contribution to human history.

I know that it can be very hard for those who live outside Italy to approach the study of the Etruscans. Nonetheless, in the U.S. Etruscan archeology has a strong and active tradition. Not only are there a couple of journals dedicated to the Etruscans (*Etruscan News* edited by Larissa Bonfante from NYU and *Etruscan Studies* by the Etruscan Foundation), but there are also annual lectures at Berkeley. Not to mention that the majority of American museums exhibit Etruscans objects!

Nevertheless, I must admit that I was quite surprised when I came to Buffalo and found students interested in Etruscan archeology. It was a great satisfaction.

There are at least two good pieces of advice I can give to students who are interested in the Etruscans. First, studying the pre-Roman populations requires a fair knowledge of Italian, because the major publications in the field are still done in this language. Secondly, first-hand knowledge of the geographical setting where these populations developed is necessary. I do not think one can studies ancient, or modern, people without knowing their geography. It is not possible to study the peoples only on book pages or maps!

Although this last aspect remains crucial, a number of important publications in English are providing American students new and updated tools for studying the Etruscans. Here let me mention for example the recent book by Jean MacIntosh Turfa *The Etruscan World* (Routledge , 2013). Currently there is an ambitious publishing project (edited by Nancy de Grummond and Lisa Pieraccini) of a series of volumes each dedicated to a single Etruscan city. By participating in two of these volumes I feel I'm giving a small contribution to make the Etruscans more accessible to American students.

You apply many diverse methods of analysis in your research, what do you find most appealing about this approach? What are the difficulties you have found in applying these methods?

The decision to use a multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary approach is perhaps

more a necessity than a choice, or at least it is an option that many of us choose after conscious reflection. Given that as archaeologists we have to deal with scarce remains from the past, only those preserved and discovered, we must be able to exploit all the available evidence, and we must know how to look for it in the best possible way. This requires the use of many techniques and many different specializations.

The most interesting thing is to see how in relatively few years, the contributions of the latest scientific studies are helping to clarify aspects of the ancient civilizations that were almost unknown. I am thinking about studies like those on ancient textiles or those on the residue analysis within ceramic containers that can finally give us a rather detailed report of perishable materials from ancient civilizations, those that have not been preserved in such a good condition as the ceramic and architectural ruins did.

The level of advancement of the techniques today requires teamwork, in which together with archaeologists, art historians and philologists, there are specialists in every field of science (chemists, biologists, computer scientists, statisticians, etc.). However, I believe that a good archaeologist, in order to direct research projects and address studies of the antiquity - being aware that a total knowledge is not feasible - should anyway have a good knowledge of all the various techniques available.

It's true I am comfortable to apply technological tools (like GPS, total stations, scanners, and so on) and rather complicated software (Autocad, GIS, R, etc.), trying to better and better integrate them in my studies. But what often interests me even more, is the dissemination of the results. As much as possible, I try to find the best way to communicate the results of my work with my colleagues and to students, but also to a wider public. Likewise, I always try to identify and communicate what are the educative potential for our society.

In this context, I believe that there is still much to be done, not only in Italy. I think that communication with the entire community, and especially the youths, is often overlooked and that archaeologists typically are not very attentive to issues of ownership of antiquities, as well as the value of tradition in the modern world.

What have been the most rewarding aspects of your time as IEMA postdoctoral fellow? What have been the most challenging?

I must say that my experience in Buffalo has been truly positive. I found a great place to work and I had a great opportunity for personal and professional enhancement. Sure, I've had a number of difficulties to adapt here, not only to American academic system that is very different from what I come from, but also to the American life-style. At IEMA in these months, unfortunately so few, I learned many things and certainly improved as a scholar and as a teacher, although I believe I still have a long way to go.

I really enjoyed the teaching component of my fellowship. The seminar was at the same time rewarding and challenging. It was a fun and educational, but it's not been easy to adapt my teaching methods to American standards. However, I believe that my students have also been able to appreciate some aspects of a different way of teaching as well as my personal contribution and viewpoint. I must certainly thank all my students for their patience and willingness, and also for their great contribution to the class discussions we have made together.

Of course, the organization of the conference was very complex, not so much the design or set up, of which I already had some experience, but conducting it in a country that was new to me. In

addition, having to interact with scholars from all over the world certainly makes the whole organization very complex, but the opportunity to discuss with them, with their very different approaches and perspectives, a theme as dear to me as inequalities in ancient times, made it worth doing. Fortunately I had the precious help of Professors Peter Biehl and Steve Dyson who aided me with their vast experience and support.

What advice would you give to graduate students in order to help them in their studies and careers?

I speak especially for students planning to continue their careers in archaeology.

For a good career development, the field experience is crucial. I urge everyone to take part in excavation projects, survey and documentation campaigns. Only in this way can one get a good degree of confidence with the archaeological evidence that is the object of our studies.

Crucial is also the direct knowledge of the materials. Drawing, photograph, restoration get you closer to what was the daily experience of the ancient people. Once again I want to stress that it is not sufficient to study only from the books: how many times, for example, have you found in a museum an object you have seen many times in the manuals, and then realize that it is actually much smaller than what you imagined?

Likewise it can be very useful to experience experimental archeology: such as through engaging in the making of objects using ancient techniques, from flint to vessels, from textiles to metal weapons, from canoes to huts.

Like every human experience, it is important to deal with the points of view of other people. Colleagues, especially if from other nationalities, help to enrich our experiences. Finally, to give a sense to our most advanced research it is necessary to participate in conferences and to publish. Only in this way can we really contribute to the advancement of the studies.

I hope these tips are useful to graduate students interested in a career in archaeology, but I hope also they are aware that to be an archaeologist, passing from dirt to books, is one of the most beautiful jobs in the world.