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Review of Peter A.J. Attema and Günter Schörner,
*Comparative Issues in the Archaeology of the Roman
Rural Landscape: Site Classification Between Survey,
Excavation and Historical Categories*

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Abstract

This fine volume is a natural successor to the two fundamental Mediterranean field survey collections: *Extracting Meaning from Ploughsoil Assemblages* (R. Francovich, H. Patterson, and G. Barker, eds. [Oxford 2000]) and *Side by Side Survey* (S. Alcock and J. Cherry, eds. [Oxford 2004]). Its best essays illustrate the advances in both methodology and theory that have characterized landscape archaeology over the decade since those fundamental volumes were published. The volume takes up the problem of classification, that is, the interpretative and evidentiary basis by which surface survey material is functionally classified. Both intentionally and tacitly, the volume also illustrates the assumptions underlying all classificatory systems and thus the challenges surface survey faces as a stand-alone tool for historical interpretation.

Disciplines

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Book Review

Comparative Issues in the Archaeology of the Roman Rural Landscape: Site Classification Between Survey, Excavation and Historical Categories

Edited by Peter A.J. Attema and Günter Schörner (*JRA* Suppl. 88). Pp. 135, figs. 34. Journal of Roman Archaeology, Portsmouth, R.I. 2012. \$69. ISBN 978-1-887829-88-5 (cloth).

Reviewed by [Kim Bowes](#)

This fine volume is a natural successor to the two fundamental Mediterranean field survey collections: *Extracting Meaning from Ploughsoil Assemblages* (R. Francovich, H. Patterson, and G. Barker, eds. [Oxford 2000]) and *Side by Side Survey* (S. Alcock and J. Cherry, eds. [Oxford 2004]). Its best essays illustrate the advances in both methodology and theory that have characterized landscape archaeology over the decade since those fundamental volumes were published. The volume takes up the problem of classification, that is, the interpretative and evidentiary basis by which surface survey material is functionally classified. Both intentionally and tacitly, the volume also illustrates the assumptions underlying all classificatory systems and thus the challenges surface survey faces as a stand-alone tool for historical interpretation.

A useful brief introduction by the editors summarizes the volume's contents, but it is the first essay, by Witcher, that sets out the volume's agenda. As he does in other essays, Witcher throws the proverbial book at classification schemes used in Roman field survey archaeology, demonstrating both their nonsystematic nature, the mixture of etic and emic terms such as "villa" and "farm," and the set of unsubstantiated assumptions that underlie the definitions of these terms. Witcher's solution calls for more complex category schemes that examine variables such as consumption patterns, occupation longevity, and local context.

For Witcher, excavation provides no solution to classificatory dilemmas, since survey and excavation, in his assessment, are fundamentally different data sets. The contributions of Schörner, Roth, and Vermeulen, however, each recognize the profitable, even requisite, need for integrated survey and excavation, especially with respect to the problem of categorization. Schörner provides new findings on the decade-old dilemma of how surface scatter relates to subsurface remains. Differing from previous studies that compared the raw percentages of ceramic finds at surface, ploughsoil, and subsurface, Schörner compared the functional classes of wares from these levels, finding that the surface/ploughsoil levels yielded significantly different functional classes than subsurface excavation. His findings raise real doubts about surface ceramics' representativeness of consumption and activity patterns—the very categories that Witcher rightly notes deserve a place in new modes of site categorization. Roth addresses yet another dilemma presented by survey: how to make meaningful classification schemes for a site type—here Etruscan and Roman nucleated settlements—about which very little is known, and which has very little surface visibility in comparison with funerary sites. Roth's examination of survey and excavation data from the Tiber Valley Project produces refined ceramic typologies and chronologies, plus topographic and functional information, unavailable in survey alone. Vermeulen's presentation of Potenza Valley survey data likewise makes use of survey, excavation legacy data, large-scale geophysics, and aerial photography to propose a finer-tuned set of site categories that likewise takes into consideration micro-local context as a variable affecting function.

Other papers in the volume make eloquent cases for richer classificatory schemes made possible through looking at surface material alone. De Haas' excellent article examines the rich information contained in small sites and "off-site" scatters. By examining their morphology and above all their location within their microenvironment, de Haas offers a richer categorization of these smallest sites—from manuring and

rubbish disposal around larger sites to eroded smaller houses/farms. He notes that sites characterized as small farms have lower artifact density or off-sites around them, possibly indicating less intensive use of surrounding lands. His argument recognizes the complex interrelational character of Roman landscapes, one that is often missed in more traditional hierarchical categories.

Francis' paper on surveys from Roman Crete makes a similar case for the richness lurking not only in surface ceramics but also in other find types. Coins, inscriptions, and architectural elements are often studied and catalogued separately from other surface data, yet they complicate site classification schemes when laid alongside ceramics. Fabric and other petrographic analysis of ceramic finds produces data on intersite exchange and distribution patterns that in turn may yield, like de Haas', a more relational model of Roman landscapes, one in which the binaries of urban and rural might be usefully blurred.

The two final articles in the volume illustrate the challenges of applying the more complex models derived from survey and excavation together, or from a more detailed immersion in surface data itself, to comparative situations. Attema and Burgers' article, using data from the multisurvey Regional Pathways to Complexity Project, argues that survey data has now obtained sufficient transparency and data wealth as to be usefully compared across regions—the desideratum expressed in *Side-by-Side Survey*. Juxtaposing data from the Pontine, Salento, and Sibaritide surveys allows the authors to note a major phase of urbanization and rural intensification in the late fourth to mid third century B.C.E. Causal explanations based on local circumstances alone (e.g., Roman colonization) fail to account for a phenomenon that is only appreciated when viewed at the macro-scale. Launaro performs a new set of statistical calculations on data from 27 Italian surveys, arguing that the majority of landscapes experienced site growth during the Late Republic/Early Empire, particularly of small site types that he associates with the free population of small farmers.

There is a certain disparity between these broad, comparative papers and the rest of the articles in the volume. The earlier warnings about classification schemes, about the relationship between pots and people, and about the representativeness of surface ceramics for issues of wealth, trade, and demographics are not necessarily reflected in the final two papers that forge ahead with the comparative project and broader historical questions. For instance, de Haas' revised classifications for small sites could be used to argue that many of Launaro's sites of free population are not population centers but stalls, rubbish deposits, and the like; attention to the exchange data from ceramic fabrics or to the more detailed site chronologies available through stratified remains might have revised Attema and Burger's assumption that the city was the origin of rural expansion and trade. Indeed, the persuasiveness of the critiques and alternative models presented in the majority of the volume's papers leaves one to wonder if the editors' claim that "thanks to the ... increase in high-quality survey projects, the comparison of regional trends in settlement evolution and demography is now within reach" (9–10) is not premature. Indeed, the great value of the volume is a turn to the micro-scale—of landscape and of evidence—and to the combination of survey with excavation, turns that at their best question the most fundamental assumptions behind survey analysis. The implications of this shift for large-scale historical work have yet to be fully absorbed.

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