

Pirates! A (Re)evaluation of the Maritime Threat to central Italian Coastal Colonies  
in the Roman Republic

The use of the term “pirate” has long perpetuated discussions involving identity and the problem of Mediterranean brigandage, which expands beyond chronological boundaries. The term seems to have been applied rather liberally by ancient Roman historians and politicians, which has been used in historical sources to refer to either a group of people or specific individuals who do not always appear to have distinct parallels (Bispham 2012). As a result, in the historical narrative of several Roman colonies located on the coast, pirates have been cited as a constant threat to town fortifications and a source of intermittent unexplained periods of destruction, which occasionally seems to explain the presence of a “decline” archaeologically (Casson 1991). However, the use of the word “pirate” was not always used to imply a set group of people with a mind towards organized sea crime and, in many cases, the physical evidence thought to support a “pirate attack” is severely lacking (Casson 1991). Instead, scholars have often suggested the occurrence of just such an episode whenever a coastal city appears to experience any hint of violence, regardless of textual and material correlation (Brown 1980).

In light of the disparity between textual and archaeological evidence, this paper examines, or re-examines, the impact of piratical events on coastal colonies of the Italian peninsula using historical and archaeological evidence from Cosa, Antium, and Ostia as case studies. The cities, although very different in establishment and management, are along the central Italian coast of the Mediterranean Sea and dealt with exposure to maritime raids. In addition, the shoreline between Antium and Ostia supposedly endured threats of piracy for many years prior to the occurrence at Cosa. As a result, the evidence of piracy, or lack thereof, may reveal patterns from the data that remain at these cities, while also questioning the assumed

narratives attached to the colonies' histories. The methodology for analysis involves an overview of the historical accounts and archaeological factors that are currently obtainable for each colony in order to see if the data either supports or refutes the pirate narratives in the region at this time. Once the evidence is presented and analyzed, an attempt is made to delve into the significance of the data in relation to other state issues, such as politics, trade systems, and colonization of the Tyrrhenian coast of Italy, primarily in the mid to late Republic.

In the case of Cosa, a Latin colony, some archaeological evidence of destruction dates to a seemingly significant event that occurred sometime in the 70s BCE (Brown 1980). The two main bodies of information that are considered grounds for this argument, besides the general "destruction" layer in the stratigraphy and indications of scattered burning on several buildings, are the "murder" of an unfortunate individual discovered at the bottom of a private domestic cistern and a coin hoard of about 2,004 denarii found inside a jar that was buried under the floor of a house, all of which predated 71 BCE and supposedly in "mint condition" (Brown 1951). There is only evidence of one deceased individual from the site, who, if a pirate attack did indeed occur, could have been a casualty of the encounter. However, there is no definitive account from historical narratives or an event cited by ancient authors that describes an attack on Cosa and, interestingly, the accompanying port below the promontory remained untouched and in seemingly continuous usage for the duration of its existence into at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE (McCann 2002). After the first hypothesis concerning a possible pirate attack on the colony was proposed, the event was included in the narrative of the colony as a fact and has not been reexamined in recent years. Thus, through a re-analysis of textual, historical, and archaeological data, this paper ultimately seeks to test the narrative of Cosa against evidence of piracy

elsewhere on the Tyrrhenian coastline of Italy, in order to determine what types of factors signify a pirate attack in the historical record.

### Bibliography

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