Dov'è il binario 28? Where is platform 28?

A simple question, yet a very important one. And, as I would be relieved to find out later that afternoon, one that had flitted through the heads of many a student in recent days. After guiltily consulting several Trenitalia employees, unfazed by the constant clamor of frazzled tourists at Termini, Rome's central train station, I was directed to a sign I had obviously missed, pointing me a quarter mile down the main tracks. As it turned out, 28 was not the new 9¾, and there would be no wizardly walking through walls today—probably a good thing. The simpler the better. As I took my seat and the train doors closed, an older Italian woman paused in the aisle and asked, "*È libero*?" Her uncomplicated question transfixed me as if it were a Hogwartsian incantation. "Is this seat free?" I nodded "yes" and eventually managed a quiet "*Sì*," pulling my bags closer to make room. "Student?" Again, "*Sì, sì*." From her brief, pointed speech, I felt as though I probably wasn't the first clueless American she'd encountered on her commute home from the city center.

The timelessness of the Eternal City warped into jumbled frames of color as Lazian suburbia whooshed pass, giving way to farms, fields, sea, sky. After the better part of two hours, I looked up to see the hill on which Cosa, now hidden from view, had been built over two millennia ago. The white-on-blue sign marking the Orbetello-Monte Argentario station greeted me a few minutes later.

My first day on site at Cosa's baths (and indeed, every day after) was one of learning. Trowelling, bucket sorting, and pickaxing became new additions to my archaeological arsenal, and terms like SU (stratigraphic unit) and CBM (ceramic building material) ascended to the top of my daily lexicon. To my untrained eye, CBM and stone at first looked identical, but as I bucket sorted alongside several new friends who answered all my questions along the way, the textures, breakage patterns, and even sounds of each slowly differentiated themselves. My hands became accustomed to the wet- and dry-brushing techniques of our early afternoon pottery washing sessions and to the delicacy of plaster and *opus signinum*, a mortar aggregate which could crumble even under the pressure of the toothbrushes we used to clear them of dirt and debris.

During my first day on site, I learned how to identify the angular forms of tesserae and the rough curves of amphora handles and rims. After a few days of watching others pickaxe through the newly exposed soil layers of each stratigraphic unit, I gave it a shot myself, with thumb blisters to boot. And in our pre-lunch presentations, we learned more about a variety of topics: how the total station, whose instrument records the positions of points around the site with a laser reflected by a height-adjustable prism, operates; the qualities and origins of different marble types found at Cosa, some of which were imported from across the Mediterranean; Cosan inscriptions and brickstamps (patterns or emblems impressed into ceramics before being fired), which give us insight into the people and entities that funded and built the settlement; security, including an exploration of which areas of the baths might have been accessible to which people; and the Roman toilette, of which we have perhaps the greatest knowledge from places like bathhouses, where jewelry and personal toiletries would have been removed, stored, dropped, or even stolen.

We always arrived for lunch at the *magazzino*—Cosa's storage space and inventory adjacent to the site's museum—hungry, sweaty, and already covered in dirt from the morning's work. A handmade *panino* had never tasted so good. As I downed bottle after bottle of water throughout the day, the *saqiya*, a sort of water elevator integral to the Cosans' expert water

management system in Tuscany's aridity,[1] seemed like it could have been awfully handy. Once we had enjoyed the shade, refilled our water bottles, and reapplied sunscreen, it was back to the trenches to finish out the afternoon and then to our return shuttle around 4:30pm. On our way back to the Residence Airone, our home for the month, the Laguna di Levante stretched away to Orbetello in the distance with the Monte Argentario promontory cutting upwards into the horizon. After digging into Cosa's intricate human history each day, this landscape brought me back to the site's unique geologic past, including the millenia-long formation of the two sandbars, or *tomboli*, cutting into the Tyrrhennian Sea below.[2]

On one of our after-site visits to the (often mispronounced) COOP grocery store in Orbetello, our cashier asked, "*Città di Cosa*?" Our sunscreened faces, dusty clothes, and work boots gave us away, time and again. When we returned to our apartments after a typical work day, we showered and then had dinner on one of the Airone's second-floor patios, fighting off both the beaming evening sun and an ever-present flock of seagulls glancing eagerly at our food from the roof adjacent. Friday evenings were the time to finalize our plans for weekend excursions up and down the coast; Pisa's leaning tower was my destination on our first weekend, Rome two weeks later, and the nearby town of Porto Santo Stefano on our final weekend, with many trips into Orbetello in between.

On the Saturday of our second weekend, we drove east to visit the Naturalistic Archaeological Park of Vulci, built to guide visitors through the buildings, spaces, and landscapes of this ancient Etruscan city. While walking the site's gravel paths through fields now home to horses and Maremmana cattle (whose upward-curving horns closely resemble Texas longhorns'), we heard from Dr. De Giorgi about Vulci's origins, its history, and the indigenous Etruscans' complicated and contentious relationship with the Romans, by whom the city would eventually be overtaken in the early third century BCE—less than a decade before Cosa's foundation.[3] While in Rome over our second weekend, I learned more about Etruscan art, Lazio's ancient geography, and Tiberius Coruncanius' victory over Vulci during a visit to the National Etruscan Museum, a quiet escape from Rome's late afternoon hustle and bustle. Learning about Vulci's complex past helped me to better contextualize Cosa's own story within the history of the region more broadly.

To begin our final day on site, we made our way up to the *Arx* ("citadel"), Cosa's highest point. As we discussed our time together before the walls of the Capitolium, the city's largest temple, we considered this season's highlights, the challenges of excavating at Cosa, and the promise that future excavations around the Tuscan Maremma hold for understanding more about the people, places, and history of ancient Roman colonies. As someone whose experience with Classics has focused largely on ancient language and literature, excavating at Cosa was an incredible first archaeological field experience. I return to Davidson this fall with not only a greater knowledge of the site and its history but also with a better context for the archaeological landscape of Tuscany more broadly.

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[1] Andrea U. De Giorgi, "Sustainable Practices? A Story from Roman Cosa (Central Italy)," *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 31, no. 1 (2018): 17.
[2] Gilles Brocard et al., "Double tombolo formation by regressive barrier widening and landslide submergence: The case of Orbetello, Italy," *Marine Geology* 477 (2024): 2-3, 16-7.
[3] Andrea U. De Giorgi, "The Foundation of Cosa: Context, Plans, and Resources," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Archaeology of Urbanism in Italy in the Age of Roman Expansion*, ed. Fabio Colivicchi and Myles McCallum (Routledge, 2024), 169-170.

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Con gratitudine,

Wesley Smail

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Images (photos by author unless otherwise specified)

The National Etruscan Museum's colonnade.

Floor mosaic at Vulci’s baths.

Pickaxing! Photo credit: Sophia Gibson

Cosa’s forum.

View from Cosa's Eastern Height, looking south.