

INVESTIGATING URBANISM AT ANCIENT GABII

June 30, 2012 The Gabii Project Day of Archaeology 2012, Digital
Archaeology, Education, Italy, Roman Archaeology, Gabii, Italy, Latin site, Michigan, Nicola
Terrenato, Rome, the University of Michigan, Tusculum, University of Michigan, Urbanism

One would scarcely guess that a mighty ancient city once occupied the site of Gabii as it is today simply a quiet spot in the eastern suburbs of Rome, Italy. Yet a quick look at the physical landscape and its now dormant volcanic features makes it plain why a first millennium BCE city grew – and prospered – here. The Gabines found themselves at a key crossroads, positioning them well to capitalize on trade in central Italy and to eventually enjoy unprecedented political and ritual friendship with Rome herself, as described by the ancient authors.



It was perhaps the fact that the site of Gabii is now abandoned – a rarity for the ancient Latin cities, shared perhaps only with Tusculum – that attracted a team from the University of Michigan to begin work on the site in 2007. A key question for the [Gabii Project](#) team then (and now) revolved around a great curiosity of the beginnings of urbanism and its processes in Italy, along with a full exploration of the material culture correlates for the emergence of social hierarchy in Latium. A two-phase geophysical survey revealed a latent street grid that proved a worthy impetus for excavations to begin in 2009.

Fast forward three years to June 2012 ... the project has now completed two survey seasons, three excavation seasons, and is embarking on its fourth excavation season. Our multi-national team brings students at all levels from all over the world to work in the heart of this extinct Latin city where they learn first-hand the cutting edge techniques of field archaeology. The site is offering up a complex narrative of settlement and abandonment that begins with evidence for Orientalizing period elite burial of infants and continues to Imperial Roman inhumation burials and industrial works, especially those aimed at exploiting the local tufo bedrock. In the middle of the story, so to speak, is a fascinating glimpse of what Italy was like at the mid-point of the first millennium BCE, when archaic elites lost traction and gave way to a differently organized society. The physical evidence of this at Gabii comes in the form of abandoned archaic compounds giving way to a quasi-orthogonal town plan that changes the alignment and apportionment of the city itself.

Our team has been in the field for over two weeks thus far in 2012 and while on June 29 we were idled by a public holiday in Rome, the day was a good one for reflection on the project, its participants, and its aims. The dual goals of excavating early Italian urbanism and helping to train a new generation of field archaeologists work surprisingly well in the pluristratified urban contexts of this Latin site. The team looks forward to unlocking more of Gabii's secrets in the coming weeks and years.