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The Island of Pontia: A Nautical Survey

By Vincent J. Bruno and
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The island of Pontia – modern Ponza---and its neighboring islands, Palmarola and Zannone, lie off Cape Circe on Italy's west coast about one hundred miles south of the mouth of the Tiber at Ostia, the ancient port of Rome. The three islands are for the most part uninhabitable rocks. The name of the main island is Greek, but there are no Greek archaeological remains on Pontia, although within sight of the island to the south—at Ischia—the remnants of a Greek settlement of the Mycenaean period have been found. The oldest Greek colony in Italy, at Cumae, is within a few hours sail. The Greek word *pontia* means “of the sea” and when applied to an island it signifies one that is “farthest out to sea.”

“It is from Greek navigators that the name certainly comes,” writes Italian archaeologist Amedeo Maiuri, for the name implies the actual position of the island in antiquity from the point of view of the Greek colonial cities of Sicily and South Italy. Pontia was, indeed, just beyond the farthest perimeter of the maritime zone that they controlled. It was an island of Homeric legend, perhaps the island of the sorceress Circe, whose name is still attached in the mainland peninsula near Pontia. To the Greeks of Sicily and southern Italy, Pontia was the place beyond which lay seas controlled by the hostile Etruscans and Carthaginians.

For ships sailing northward from Italy, Pontia and Cape Circe form the last conspicuous landmarks before the sea opens out into a wide and relatively featureless zone. There, on a course paralleling the coast, one may not sight land again until the long, low estuary of the Tiber reaches out across the bow. The difference between this zone north of Pontia and the area of Greek colonization to the south is very marked. South of Pontia, the coast is punctuated by dramatic mountain chains reaching far out to sea, to shelter a series of deep bays, and each of these promontories has off its point a corresponding island. In this southern region of the Tyrrhenian, a ship is never out of sight of land for long, and one is aware that each successive landfall shelters some famous city. For example, Cape Palinurus encloses the Gulf of Salerno. Nearby are the cities of Elin and Paestum. Then comes the Bay of Naples with Neapolis and Cumae. The offshore islands, like beacons marking the location of the major cities and geographical features of the coast, begin with the Aeolian group in the south, midway between Sicily and Palinurus. Next is Capri, lying off the headland that separates the Gulf of Salerno from the Bay of Naples. Then comes Ischia, off the headland that encloses Cumae. Finally, there is the Gulf of Gaeta culminating with the high, curving mountain of Cape Circe and Pontia about 20 miles offshore. Here begins the territory of the Volsei, an Italian people from Central Italy, who migrated to the territory south

of Latium in the sixth century B.C. As for Pontia, apart from the Leolithis remains, there appears to have been no settlement until the founding of the Roman colony in 313 B.C.

Thus the classical history of the island of Pontia before the Romans is exclusively one of the myth and poetry. Vergil's description of the route advised by the Trojan seer, Helenus, for the journey of Teneas and his followers in their migration to Italy offers a beautifully poetic but none the less accurate picture of the Tyrrhenian approaches to the mouth of the Tiber in which Pontia emerges as Circe's Isle. After earlier advising that the ships steer a course outside Sicily to avoid an encounter with the Scylla monster, Helenus instructs: "You must bend your oar in the Trinacrian wave and traverse with your ships the surface of the Ausonian sea and go to the nether lakes and the island of Aeaeon Circe before you can build you r city on safe land!" (*Aeneid* 3, 384-87)

The Trinacrian wave indicates the seas of Sicily; the Ausonian sea is to the southwest of Italy. The nether lakes must be the volcanic lakes at the legendary entrance to the underworld near Cumae. Thus Circe's Isle, the last of the landmarks in the chain, can only be Pontia, or perhaps Cape Circe itself, which looks like an island from the sea. Maiuri points out that no other island better than Pontia accords with the Homeric verse, "the island which the boundless sea encircles" (*Odyssey* 10, 195). "The island," Maiuri continues, "with its shadowy mirrors" (referring to its coves), "its grottoes fantastically hung all round with polychrome rocks or frightening precipices...must necessarily call up here, better than elsewhere, the fabled voyage of Ulysses and the enchanted abode of Circe."

It is interesting that Virgil has the ships pass through the area known to have been traveled by the heroes of the Mycenaean Age, then go beyond to enter an unknown world before there may land in an area of safety. In the actual voyage related at the end of the fifth book of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas' last stop in what we might think of in this context as the "civilized world" was at Cumae, following the incident of Palinurus' death. Palinurus is lulled into unconsciousness and cast overboard by Somnus (*Aeneid* 5, 835-61) at a point that must correspond more or less with Cape Palinurus, the place to which legend has attached his name. After Palinurus drowns, and the ships have seemingly sailed on for a good part of the night, they encounter next the Islands of the Sirens. Aeneas awakens to the danger just in time, as the ships approach the Sirens' rocks, "perilous formerly and white with the bones of many men" (line 865). He can hear how the "rocks resounded hoarsely afar with the constant surf" (line 866). At this point, the fleet begins to look for a place to put in for water and provisions, and arrives at Cumae.

If we start from the drowning off Cape Palinurus, accepting its present location as the one Vergil envisioned the idea that the fleet must encounter one more obstacle, the islands of the Sirens off the Amalfi coast, before reaching the shelter of Cumae in the Gulf of Naples, accords perfectly with the geographical realities. Near the top of the Amalfi promontory, not far from Positano, there is a group of rocks that very well may be those Vergil had in mind for the islands of The Sirens, or he may have meant Capri, some distance off the point. Next comes Cumae and finally Circe's Isle, or Pontia, the last thing to be seen after which the ships of Aeneas enter the "safe" or non-Greek part of the Tyrrhenian coast.

The Roman colonization of Pontia in the late fourth century B.C. is recorded in Livy (9.28.7) and Diodorus Siculus (1.101.31), and it is not surprising that the archaeological evidence brought to light in our nautical survey of the island confirms the accuracy of the written record. This evidence is in the form of a small collection of amphora fragments found in the

waters of Pontia by scuba divers working under the auspices of the American Academy in Rome. In fact, it was at the suggestion of Frank E. Brown, then director of the Academy's excavations at Cosa, that the exploration of the Pontine waters was undertaken in the 1970's. Cosa and Pontia were founded by the Romans only a few decades apart. Both colonies were to become important maritime bases for Rome in its wars with Carthage. It would seem that the planting of two towns represented an early effort by Rome to establish commercial and maritime bases, thus enhancing the economic and military security of the Tyrrhenian coast. While the location of the Roman Cosa has long been known, and the Port of Cosa is emerging as a major export center during the second and first centuries B.C., the exact location of the Roman colony on the island of Pontia has never been determined. A survey group set out for the island to see if any hints of the location of the ancient town might be discovered. The crew consisted of student divers from the State University of New York at Binghamton, under the supervision of their swimming coach, Dave Thomas.

The island of Pontia is a narrow crescent of high limestone ridges descending in sheer cliffs to a series of indented coves, each with long points and offshore rocks carved by the waves into fantastic shapes. Some of these very shapes appear in ancient paintings and reliefs representing the episodes of Homer's *Odyssey*. Compare, for example, the rocks of the Faraglioni della Madonna or the Calzone Muto with the rock formations in scenes from the *Odyssey Frieze*, a painting from a first-century V.C. Roman house on the Esquiline Hill in Rome, now in the Vatican.

If one follows the coastline south from the northern tip of Pontia, one sees lines of rocks extending outward from the arms of several inlets, most prominently off the Punta Nera, the Scoglia Ravia at Punta Santa Maria, and the Punta della Madonna. The two latter points are situated on either side of the modern harbor of Ponza, the best natural harbor on the island. They deserve special attention, for it was in these two locations that extensive underwater deposits of broken remnants of ancient amphoras were observed by members of our survey group.

On the map, (see page ???), the green areas in the sea represent the shores actually searched by our swimmers, while yellow indicates the beaches and shallow waters searched on foot. Red marks show the location of concentrations of ancient sherds, whether underwater or on shore. The materials in shallow waters along the beaches included fragments of kitchen ware, together with pieces of structural elements such as terracotta bricks and broken roof tiles. The positions of the two largest deposits of amphora fragments found in the course of the search lie at depths of about 50 to 100 feet (or approximately 15 to 30 meters) along the cliffs and rocks of the Punta della Madonna, and in shallower depths of 30 to 50 feet (or approximately 10 to 15 meters) behind the Scoglia Ravia. These two deposits may very well point to the location of the ancient Roman colony and harbor within the deep bay that lies between them.

Samples of the sherds in these locations were taken back to the workrooms at Cosa and later studied by co-author Elizabeth Lyding Will. As a result of her analysis, we may now state that the deposits contain examples of amphoras dating from the various periods all the way from the late fourth century B.C., when the colony was founded, to the fifth century A.D., when the harbor may have ceased to function as a port.

Before proceeding to a description of the sampled fragments, however, we must first consider the general character of the deposits. The question arises, how did those two extraordinary concentrations of amphora fragments come to be where they were found, just

outside the confines of the bay? One possibility would be a series of shipwrecks, but the fact that so many different periods are represented in the fragments makes this extremely unlikely. Accumulations of so many tiny fragments of different types would rather indicate the sites of all-shore dumping grounds to be associated with the daily activities of a busy harbor.

The dense groupings of amphora fragments observed by our divers in those two locations, then, together with the significant absence of any comparable concentrations of ancient materials elsewhere in the Pontine waters, strongly suggest that the main sea traffic arriving at Pontia in ancient times would have come here to shelter behind the natural protection offered by the Punta della Madonna. This point also has a spit of land extending northwestward from its root, creating behind it a small but very well protected inner harbor, open only toward the northwest wind, the *Maestrale*, which is, however, completely shut out by the high ridge of the long north-curving tail of the island itself. The inner harbor of Punta della Madonna thus presents itself as the obvious location of the lost cononial town, just as it is the busy port of the present day. Unfortunately, the breakwater and harbor embankments surrounding this inner port were completely rebuilt in the early part of the eighteenth century (completed in 1739) long before the reporting of archaeological remains in the sea became a matter of established practice. The modern town has since spread out over the surrounding hills in every direction. Consequently, the surface traces of an ancient town in this location would inevitably have disappeared.

Apart from the Punta della Madonna area, the only other bay on the island of Pontia this is protected well enough to consider as a Roman port is that at La Forna on the northwest. This bay has an inlet at its southwestern reach, the Cala di Feola, with a good sand beach at its head, affording a possible landing place. In a northwest gale, the entire bay would be fairly turbulent, but it is sufficiently well protected to offer safe anchorage and beaching of smaller craft under most conditions. But while a thin scattering of ancient terracotta fragments was indeed discovered on the beaches of the Cala di Feola, an underwater search of the surrounding waters revealed nothing to compare with the accumulations of amphora fragments in and around the harbor on the other side of the island where, as we shall see, 800 years of commercial traffic can now be documented. The Cala di Feola, although evidently occupied in the ancient period, was not an active seaport as was the harbor of Punta della Madonna.

Another indication of the importance of the Punta della Madonna harbor is the existence of a great tunnel that connects the port area with the large west-facing bay on the opposite side of the island known today as the Chiardiluna, or Chiaia di Luna. The tunnel goes right through the narrow limestone spine of the island, for a distance of 168 meters; it is lighted along the way by a number of shafts cut through the overlying rock. The sides and vaulting of the tunnel are reinforced with concrete and in some places an original facing of the reticulate masonry typical of the Late Republican period is preserved. The Chiardiluna bay offers a landing place that would have been easier to reach than the Punta della Madonna for ships arriving from the northwest, in other words from Rome. While there are no amphora fragments, nor any other signs of an ancient presence in the Chiardiluna, its wide beach and clean approach relatively free of offshore dangers, would have provided an ideal base for a fleet of warships.

Livy informs us that Pontia was one of a number of colonies willing and able to provide significant support to Rome in men and money during the period of Hannibal's invasion of Italy (218-203 B.C.). Given its position, it seems very likely that the main value to the

Romans of the colony at Pontia in such a crisis must have been as a maritime base for military fleets. That might explain the rather ambitious project of the tunnel and the need to connect what may have been a naval harbor at Chiardiluna with the commercial harbor at Punta della Madonna, the latter being the only source of food and water for anyone landing on the Chiardiluna side of the island.

There is some possibility, too, that the bay of Chiardiluna may have been important for religious reasons, for on the heights above it is what appears to have been one of the island's principal cemeteries in antiquity. The hill above the bay is honeycombed with rock-cut chambers, curiously enough of a Hellenistic rather than a Roman or Italic type. The basic form of the tombs is that of the typical rock-cut *hypogeum*, a single rectangular chamber, some with architectonic facades carved in the walls of the cliff.

All of the known materials from this cliff-top necropolis date to the first and second centuries A.D., although objects from earlier graves may easily have vanished. Architecturally, the tombs belong to a Greek Hellenistic tradition that is much older. Perhaps the Volsci, with their Etruscan connections, were instrumental in introducing this eastern form at Pontia in the days of the original colonists. The Volsci seem to have been settled in the mainland area nearest to Pontia, at Circeii, since before the beginning of the fifth century B.C. By the early fourth century, they had become allied to Rome. They may easily have had a settlement on Pontia before the arrival of a Roman colony.

While the literary sources make it clear that the chief period of Pontia's prosperity and importance must have been during the era of the Roman Republic, the major ancient ruins visible on the island today belong to the Augustan and early Julio-Claudian periods. Indeed, the island was notorious in the Early Empire as a place of exile for members of the royal family who were for one reason or another causing embarrassment at Rome. It was here that Nero, son of Germanicus, died (Suet. *Tib.* 54), after his imprisonment by Tiberius. Here, too, was the villa to which Caligula banished his sisters (Tac. *Ann.* 14.53). IN fact, the terraces of a great Augustan and Julio-Claudian villa reach along the heights from one end of Pontia to the other. The ruins include an extraordinary pool high up on the northern cliffs, an odeion, and, at sea level down by the port, what seems to be an elaborate system of rock-cut fish-tanks. Apart from the tunnel, however, no trace has been found of architectural survivals datable as early as the Republican colony. The amphora fragments lying among the rocks in the approaches to the harbor thus emerge as the only archaeological confirmation so far of the existence of the colony on the island.

Because of their potential chronological significance, the deposits of amphora fragments lying off the harbor were closely searched for samples that might prove possible to date. Fragments showing features such as shapes of rims, necks, handles, or bases were brought to the surface and examined in the boats. Some 20 of these were selected for further study and transported to Cosa, where co-author Will was able to analyze them. Fifteen of the 20 samples proved identifiable; the remaining five were too poorly preserved to be categorized with confidence. Will's findings revealed that the sampling contained examples of amphoras dating from as early as the late fourth century B.C., when the colony was founded, to as late as the fifth century A.D., when the harbor may have ceased to function as a port.

The amphoras had been used to transport various foodstuffs –wine, olive oils, garum (a fish sauce), and possibly olives. The oldest finds, those of Republican wine jars, are of particular interest here, for they represent the earliest archaeological materials so far found on the

island apart from Neolithic finds. There are two distinct types of Republican period wine jars, the earlier of which dates to a period coinciding precisely with the late fourth century B.C. date given by Livy for the founding of the Roman colony. Five of the 15 identifiable fragments from the total of 20 studied are of the early Greco-Italic shape (Will Type 1a) which begins to appear in archaeological contexts at just this time. The Will Type 1a amphoras are thought to have been manufactured in various parts of the Mediterranean area. The type is found with great frequency from Spain to the Black Sea, but was not in use after the beginning of the First Punic War (264-41 B.C.).

According to our survey notes, two of the Will Type 1a examples were found at Punta della Madonna, while the other three were recovered on the opposite side of the harbor between the Scoglia Ravia and the point off the modern town of Santa Maria. One of these fragments was actually situated beyond the red zone marked on the map, some distance to the north of Santa Maria's point and close inshore where a few fragments seem to have been carried from the dense concentration at the Scoglia Ravia by some accident of coastal currents. We have no idea how many of the fragments originally located in this area may have been removed by swimmers over the years.

Two centuries later in date than the Greco-Italic fragments is a piece of an Italian wine amphora from the first century B.C. (Dressel's Form 1, Will Type 4b). This was a type of container which carried the wines of central and southern Italy to all corners of the Roman world during the Late Republic and the Early /Augustan era. Even more recent in date than the wine jars are the containers for garum, a fish sauce popular in the ancient Mediterranean. Two such examples (early examples of Dressel's Form 7) date from the latter part of the first century B.C., while a third garum fragment comes from a cylindrical amphora type (Almagro/Beltran Form 50), which was probably manufactured in Portugal and Spain in the third century after Christ.

Also belonging to the period of the Roman Empire are four fragments of amphoras that brought olive oil to Pontia from North Africa; this is the second largest assemblage from the sampling. Three of these jars were a type now referred to as "African II," and date from the third century. A smaller North African variety, made in the fifth century after Christ, is the latest of the fragments. It comes from the neck of a sword-shaped jar called a "spatheion," and it may have served as a container for olives as well as for olive oil.

And finally, two of the fragments come from types that cannot yet be securely dated or assigned places of manufacture. One piece may be the base of a large container of uncertain date (Beltran Forms 59-60), which was probably another North African olive oil jar. The second of these fragments is the neck of a small, flat-bottomed amphora that is close in appearance to Dressel's Form 29; jars of this shape which may have contained wine, probably date from the last half of the second century after Christ.

Although a small sampling, the fragments from Pontia attest to a long and varied commercial life for the island, one which reached outward to many major markets in the Roman Mediterranean world. We are not dealing here with single shipwreck sites but with the accumulation of centuries. At the same time, these accumulations can hardly be thought of as dumps belonging to ordinary anchorages for ships; the isolation of the rocks and their position some distance beyond the protection available in the harbor area makes this highly unlikely. It seems more probable that the two groups originally formed part of the harbor's dumping ground for amphoras, after the contents had been transferred into containers for market.

Further inside the harbor, at Scoglia di Frisio and along the beach northward, were numerous fragments of ancient roof tiles at a point not too distant from the entrance to the ancient tunnel. If we consider the possibility that much of the ancient material may have disappeared over the centuries, it may be that the groups of sherds now found at Scoglia di Frisio once extended eastward to link up with those found along the shore beyond Scoglia Ravia and in among the rocks. If these two groups were once associated with a single context centering on the landing at Santa Maria, then we may consider that our dated examples characterize the activity of what was probably the most important harbor area on the island of Pontia in antiquity.