THE INTRODUCTION OF THE DOMESTICATED CAT IN ITALY

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Summary

The excavations carried out by the "Soprintendenza Archeologica di Romà" during these last years in the ancient Fidenae city have led to the identification of a building of the Early Iron Age, dated from the middle of the 8th century BC. The most remarkable characteristic of this building is its state of good preservation. It is quite likely that the building was destroyed by a sudden fire while it was fully in use. This possibility is confirmed by one special feature: in the south-eastern corner of the building, the destruction layer included the calcinated skeletal remains of a domestic cat, which apparently had been trapped inside the building by the fire and by the subsequent collapse. This find is especially significant with regard to the state of the building when the destruction took place; moreover, it constitutes the earliest evidence of the presence of the domestic cat in Italy, apparently slightly earlier than those found in other Iron Age contexts of Lazio, at Ficana and Cures.

Résumé

L'introduction du chat domestique en Italie.

Les fouilles menées ces derniers temps par la "Soprintendenza Archeologica di Romà" dans l'ancienne ville de Fidene ont conduit à l'identification d'une habitation de l'Âge du Fer, datée du milieu du 8e siècle avant J.-C. La caractéristique la plus remarquable de cette structure est son exceptionnel état de conservation. Il est assez probable que l'habitation a été détruite par un incendie pendant qu'elle était encore utilisée. Cette hypothèse semble confirmée par un facteur particulier. À l'intérieur de l'habitation, dans l'angle sud-est, ont été découverts les restes calcinés du squelette d'un chat domestique, qui à l'évidence, est resté pris au piège à l'intérieur. À part l'intérêt spécifique de cette découverte en ce qui concerne la situation de l'habitation au moment de l'incendie, on note que c'est le plus ancien témoignage du chat domestique en Italie; d'autres félins domestiques ont été découverts dans les fouilles de Ficana et Cures mais ils datent de périodes plus récentes.

Zusammenfassung

Die Einführung der Hauskatze in Italien.

Die in den letzten Jahren von der "Soprintendenza Archeologica di Romà"im alten Fidenae durchgeführten Ausgrabungen führten zur Aufdeckung eines Hauses der frühen Eisenzeit. Es datiert in die Mitte des 8. Jh. v. Chr. Bemerkenswert ist der gute Erhaltungszustand des Gebäudes. Es erscheint möglich, daß das Haus durch ein plötzliches Feuer zerstört worden ist, während es noch voll in Gebrauch war. Diese Annahme wird durch einen Befund unterstützt: in der Südostecke des Hauses fand sich in der Schuttschicht das kalzinierte Skelett einer Hauskatze, die offenbar durch das Feuer und den anschließenden Einsturz des Gebäudes zu Tode gekommen ist. Dieser Fund belegt nicht nur den Status des Hauses vor seiner Zerstörung, vielmehr stellt er auch den frühesten Nachweis für die Hauskatze in Italien dar - früher als die Belege in anderen eisenzeitlichen Siedlungen wie Ficania und Cures.

Key Words

Fidenae, Iron Age, Domesticated cat.

Mots clés

Fidene, Âge du Fer, Chat domestique.

Schlüsselworte

Fidenae, Eisenzeit, Hauskatze.

Research conducted in the last several years by the "Soprintendenza Archeologica di Romà" in the area of the ancient settlement of Fidene has resulted in the identification of a housing structure (hut) from the Early Iron Age which can be dated, as a whole, to the beginning of the third Latial phase corresponding to immediately before or in the middle of the eighth century BC (Bietti Sestieri *et al.*, 1990, 1991).

The principal interest of the structure at Fidene (fig. 1) lies in its fine state of conservation which preserved elements such as the holes for structural beams and drainage canals for water cut into the surrounding rock bed, the walls, which all collapsed toward the center of the building, and the furnishings materials used within. The only damage is a metre-wide trench running through the north-eastern section of the building including the corner, probably of "archaic" origins.

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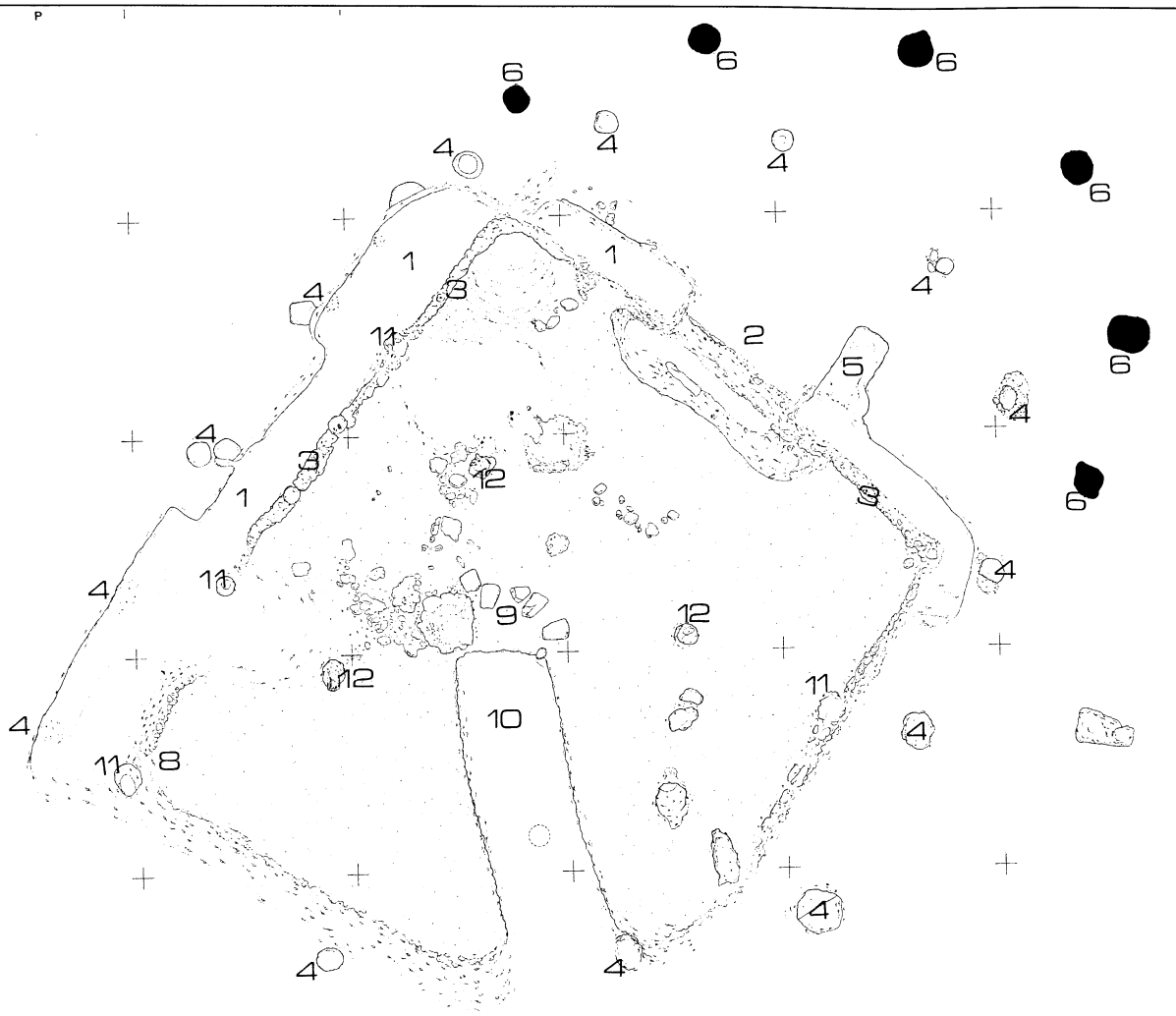

Fig. 1: Fidene; plan of the Iron Age building: 1, artificial bank of tufa; 2, entrance (western side of the building); 3, base of wall *in situ*; 4, post-holes along the external perimeter of the building; 5, accessory structure of baked clay leaning against the western side of the bank; 6, post-holes of a revetment palisade or remains of an earlier structure; 7, area of the *dolia*; 8, remains of a domestic cat in the southeastern corner; 9, group of firedogs in the central area; 10, archaic trench in the northeastern half of the building; 11, post-holes within the wall; 12, post-holes of the load-bearing supports.

The collapse of the structure was caused by a fire of great intensity, as indicated by visible traces on the baked clay of the walls and the other materials. The structure's collapse can be reconstructed as the result of the initial collapse of the load bearing supports followed closely by the falling inward of the walls except for the eastern wall which fell at least partially towards the outside of the structure.

The possibility that details about the use of the structure and about the lives of its inhabitants were preserved by the building's collapse is confirmed by a particular fact. The calcinated skeletal remains of a cat, evidently trapped inside the structure, were found under the layer of rubble in the southeast corner of the building. Aside from the specific interest of this discovery in understanding the condition of the structure at the time of the fire, it should be noted that this is the oldest documented evidence of a domesticated cat in Italy. The fact that the remains are those of a domesticated cat is proved both by archaeological evidence (the cat's position inside the hut) and by archaeozoological data. The bones demonstrate the same morphological characteristics

of the domesticated form (Kratochvil, 1973, 1976) and their size, even considering the reduction caused by the process of calcination, falls within the range of variability for domesticated cats (see appendix on measurements).

Other reports of domesticated felines although, probably slightly more recent (second half of 8th century BC) have been documented at Cures (Ruffo, 1988) and Ficana, where an entire radius was discovered among the material uncovered in the zone "5 A", in the area of the "portico" (De Grossi Mazzorin, 1989). Both the morphology and the size of the find clearly identify it as belonging to a domesticated cat.

Remains of another feline were unearthed recently in an Archaic well in the settlement of Acquafredda near Rome. Two cranial fragments were discovered that were attributable to a very young cat. Based on the eruption of the teeth present in the fragment of maxillary bone and on the absence of erupted permanent premolars, the age of the cat was estimated to be around four months (Silver, 1969). The domestication of the cat brought about morphological changes in the skeletal structure of the species which affected its cranial shape (Szunyoghy, 1952). In this particular case, the fact that the remains belong to such a young animal has made it difficult to establish with certainty whether the cat was domesticated or wild, although the size of the teeth and the bone structure would seem to indicate the domesticated form.

It is still not clear when and how the domesticated cat reached the Italian peninsula although fine pictorial representations are already present in a number of wall paintings in the Etruscan tombs of Tarquinia (Baldasseroni, 1929; Caloi *et al.*, 1988) and evidence of its presence is recorded among the fauna found in various excavations from the 7th and 8th centuries BC. Most probably the introduction to these regions follows the Greek colonization of Southern Italy. The cat was used, without a doubt, both for the control of rodents and as a pet and perhaps, initially, it was a luxury reserved for the aristocratic class.

Appendix

Measurements (mm) of the domestic cat from Fidene:

cranium:
Lenght and breadth of the canine alveolus = 5.5 x 4.5

scapula:
(R) GLP = 13.7; LG = 12; BG = 9.3; SLC = 11.7

humerus:
(R) Bp = 20.5; Dp = 16.7
(L) Bd = 18; Dd = 10.5

radius:
(R) Bp = 8.4; Dp = 5.7; SD = 5.5
(L) Bp = 8; Dp = 5.7; SD = 5.1

ulna:
(R) BPC = 8.9; SDO = 9.4; DPA = 10.5
(L) BPC = 8.1; SDO = 9.1; DPA = 10.4

femur:
(R) Bp = 19.8; DC = 9.3; Bd = 18.2; Dd = 15
(L) DC = 9.1

tibia:
(R) Bp = 19; SD = 6.8
(L) Bp = 19.2

rotula:
(R) GL = 14.2; GB = 8.1

calcaneus:
(R) GL = 31.1; GB = 13
(L) GL = 31.5; GB = 13

metatarsus II
(R) GL = 51.8
(L) GL = 52.5

metatarsus III
(L) GL = 52.2

(R) = right (L) = left
measurements are taken according to A. von den Driesch (1976) and Z. Kratochvil (1973).

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