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George Dennis

Excerpt

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THE CITIES AND CEMETERIES

OF

ETRURIA.

CHAPTER I.

VEII. —THE CITY.

Hoc tunc Veii fuere : quæ reliquæ ? quod vestigium ?—FLORUS.

*Sic magna fuit censuque virisque
 Perque decem potuit tantum dare sanguinis annos ;
 Nunc humilis veteres tantummodo Troja ruinas,
 Et pro divitiis tumulos ostendit avorum.*—OVID. *Met.*

OF all the cities of Etruria, none takes so prominent a place in history as Veii. One of the earliest, nearest, and certainly the most formidable of the foes of Rome—for nearly four centuries her rival in military power, her instructress in civilisation and the arts—the southern bulwark of Etruria—the richest city of that land—the Troy of Italy—Veii excites our interest as much by the length of the struggle she maintained, and by the romantic legends attending her overthrow, as by the intimate connection of her history with Rome's earliest and most spirit-stirring days. Such was her greatness—such her magnificence—that, even after her conquest, Veii disputed with the city

of Romulus for metropolitan honours ; and, but for the eloquence of Camillus, would have arisen as *Roma Nova* to be mistress of the world.¹ Yet, in the time of Augustus, we are told that the city was a desolation,² and a century later its very site is said to have been forgotten.³ Though re-colonised under the Empire, it soon again fell into utter decay, and for ages Veii was blotted from the map of Italy. But when, on the revival of letters, attention was recalled to the subject of Italian antiquities, its site became a point of dispute. Fiano, Ponzano, Martignano, and other places, found their respective advocates. Some, with Castiglioni, placed it at Civita Castellana ; others, with Cluverius, at Scrofano, near Monte Musino ; Zanchi at Monte Lupolo, above Baccano ; while Holstenius, Nardini, and Fabretti assigned to it the site which more recent researches have determined beyond a doubt to belong to it. This is in the neighbourhood of Isola Farnese, a hamlet about eleven miles from Rome, on the right of the Via Cassia.⁴

The ancient road from Rome seems to have left the Via Cassia about the fifth milestone, not far from the sepulchre vulgarly, but erroneously, called that of Nero ; and to have pursued a serpentine course to Veii ; but this road, Sir William Gell thinks, has been little travelled since the formation of the Via Cassia (A.U. 629), yet it must have been the way to the Municipium that subsequently arose on the site. Instead of pursuing this ancient track,

¹ Liv. V. 51—55.

² Propert. IV. Eleg. x. 29.

³ Florus, I. 12.

⁴ This agrees with the distance indicated by Dionysius (II. p. 116. ed. Sylburg), who says Veii is 100 stadia from Rome, or more than twelve miles, the distances being anciently reckoned from

the Forum. The Peutingerian Table also gives twelve miles as the distance. Livy (V. 4) speaks of it in round terms as “ within the twentieth milestone, almost in sight of the City.” Eutropius, a notorious blunderer, calls the distance eighteen miles (I. 17).

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now distinguishable only to a practised eye by the sepulchres and tumuli at its side, travellers usually push on to La Storta, the first post-house from Rome, and beyond the ninth milestone on the Via Cassia. Hence it is a mile and a half to Isola by the carriage road ; but the visitor, on horse or foot, may save half a mile by taking a pathway across the downs. When Isola Farnese comes into sight, let him halt awhile to admire the scene. A wide sweep of the Campagna lies before him, in this part broken into ravines or narrow glens, which, by varying the lines of the landscape, redeem it from the monotony of a plain, and by patches of wood relieve it of its usual nakedness and sterility. On a steep cliff, about a mile distant, stands the village of Isola—a village in fact, but in appearance a large château, with a few outhouses around it. Behind it rises the long, swelling ground, which once bore the walls, temples, and palaces of Veii, but is now a bare down, partly fringed with wood, and without a single habitation on its surface. At a few miles' distance rises the conical, tufted hill of Musino, the supposed scene of ancient rites, the Eleusis, or Delphi, it may be, of Etruria. The eye is then caught by a tree-crested mound or tumulus, standing in the plain beyond the site of the city ; then it stretches away to the triple paps of the Monticelli, and to Tivoli, gleaming from the dark slopes behind ; and then it rises and scans the majestic chain of Apennines, bounding the horizon with their dark grey masses, and rests with delight on La Leonessa and other well-known giants of the Sabine range, all capt with snow. Oh, the beauty of that range ! From whatever part of the Campagna you view it, it presents those long, sweeping outlines, those grand, towering crests—not of Alpine abruptness, but consistently with the character of the land, preserving, even when soaring highest, the

true Italian dignity and repose—the *otium cum dignitate* of Nature.

Isola is a wretched hamlet of ruinous houses, with not more than thirty inhabitants. Even the palace, which belongs to the Rospigliosi family, is falling into decay, and the next generation will probably find the place uninhabited. The caverns which yawn in the cliffs around give a mysterious interest to the spot, and whet the curiosity to see the antiquities of Veii. In the little piazza are several relics of Roman domination, sculptural and inscriptive.

It is necessary to take Isola on the way to the ancient city, as the *cicerone* dwells there. This worthy, “Antonio Valéri at your service,” is a big, burly man, swollen, you might think, with official dignity, did not his sallow cheek and haggard look betray the ravages of disease—the malaria fever, which either emaciates or bloats its victims.

He who would make the tour of Veii must not expect to see numerous monuments of the past. Scarcely one Etruscan site has fewer remains, yet few possess greater interest. Veii lives in the page of history rather than in extant monuments; she has no Colosseum, no Parthenon, no Pyramids—scarcely a fragment even from which the antiquarian Cuvier may reconstruct her frame. The very skeleton of Veii has crumbled to dust—the city is its own sepulchre—here, *si monumentum requiris—circumspice!*

Yet is there no want of interest in a spot so hallowed by legend and history. The shadow of past glory falls as solemnly on the spirit as that of temple or tower. It is something to know and feel that “here was and is” not. The senses may desire more relics to link the present to the past; but the imagination need not here be “gravelled for lack of matter.”

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Since there are so few remains at Veii, it is hardly worth while to make the entire circuit of the city, yet there are three or four spots of interest which all should visit—the *Arx*—the *Columbarium*—the *Ponte Sodo*—and the *Painted Tomb*. Beyond this there are but scattered fragments of walls—the sites of the gates, determined only by the nature of the ground—and the remains of several bridges.

I shall detail the track I took on my first visit, and the reader, with the aid of the Plan, will be enabled to trace the site of every object of interest within and around the walls of Veii.

My guide led the way into the glen which separates *Isola* from the ancient city, and in which stands a mill—most picturesquely situated, with the city-cliffs towering above it, and the stream sinking in a cascade into a deep gully, overshadowed by *ilex*.⁵ Hence a path leads up to the site of one of the ancient gates. Near it are some remains of the walls, composed of small rectangular blocks of *nenfro*.⁶

The information of the guide, though he be superior in station and intelligence to the ordinary run of *ciceroni* on

⁵ These cliffs have been supposed by Nibby (*Analisi de' Dintorni di Roma*, III., *voce Veii*) to have been the *Tarpeian Rock* of Veii, whence criminals were cast headlong. It is a pure conjecture, without the slightest foundation,—there are twenty other spots which would have served the purpose quite as well. We do not even know that this was an Etruscan mode of punishment.

⁶ A volcanic stone, a species of *tuffo*, distinguished from the ordinary red or yellow sorts of the *Campagna* by its colour, a dark grey, and by its superior hardness and compactness—a difference

said to be owing to its having cooled more slowly and uninterruptedly. Abeken, *Mittelitalien*, p. 16.

Orioli (*Annali dell' Istituto Archeologico*, 1834, p. 170) imagines *nenfro* to be an ancient Etruscan word, which has survived the lapse of ages, and that it had some analogy with *nefredes* (see *Festus*) from the peculiarity of the stone, and that the Etruscans called it *nuphrun*—*Nuphruna* being an Etruscan family (*Vermiglioli, Iscrizioni Perugine*, I. p. 155, 160). The same name also exists in the epitaphs of the celebrated *Grotta Volunni* of Perugia.

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Etruscan sites, is not to be received with implicit faith. According to him, the mill marks the scene of the slaughter of the Fabii, that noblest and bravest of Roman families—a mere conjecture, arising, probably, from the erroneous notion that Isola was the site of their camp.⁷ He also points out some walling on the verge of the cliff-bound plateau that here projects into the glen, and pronounces it to be the pier of a bridge which had spanned the hollow at this spot, and communicated with a road in a narrow cleft in the hill opposite. The ruins, more probably, formed a portion of the city-walls. It is ungracious, however, to convict a man of ignorance of his own trade, and on such occasions it is ever wise to adhere to the proverb,

Odi, vede, e tace
Se vuoi viver in pace.

If in peace with your neighbour you wish to live long,
Listen, and look, but hold your tongue.

Following the line of the high ground to the east, I passed several other fragments of the ancient walls, all mere embankments, and then struck across bare downs or corn-fields into the heart of the city. A field, overgrown with briars, was pointed out by Antonio as the site of excavations, where were found, among other remains, the colossal statue of Tiberius, now in the Vatican, and the twelve Ionic columns of marble, which sustain the portico of the Post-office at Rome. This was probably the Forum of the Roman "*Municipium Augustum Veiens*," which rose on the ruins of Etruscan Veii. The *columnarum*, or Roman sepulchre, hard by, must have been without the limits of the *municipium*, which occupied but a small portion of the site of the original city; when first

⁷ The Fabii were slaughtered on a height, not in a valley. Liv. II. 50. Dionys. IX. p. 579.

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CHAP. I.]

ROMAN VEII.

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opened, it contained stuccoes and paintings in excellent preservation,⁸ but it is now in a state of utter ruin.

I now entered on a wide down, overrun with rank vegetation, where tall thistles and briars played no small devilry with one's lower limbs, and would deny all passage to the fair sex, save on horseback. On I struggled, passing what Antonio declared to be an ancient theatre, but what is merely a Roman tomb, till I found traces of an ancient road, slightly sunk between banks. This was the road from Rome to the *municipium*, and after crossing the site of the ancient city in a direct line, it fell into the Via Cassia. I traced it a long distance across the briery down, and then into a deep hollow, choked with thickets, where I came upon large polygonal blocks of basalt, such as usually compose Roman pavement.⁹ This was without the limits of the Etruscan city, in a narrow hollow, which separated the city from its Arx. At this spot is a fragment of the ancient walls. The road ran down the hollow towards Rome, and was probably called the Via Veientana.

The Arx is a table-land of no great extent, rising precipitously from the deep glens which bound it, save at the single point where a narrow ridge unites it to the city. Such a position would mark it at once as the citadel, even had it not traditionally retained its ancient designation in its modern name, Piazza d'Armi; and its juxta-position and connection with the city give it much superior claims to be so considered, than those which can be urged for the height of Isola Farnese, which is separated from the city by a wide hollow. There is also every reason to

⁸ Nibby, loc. cit.

⁹ The gate which existed at this spot is styled the Porta Romana by Gell, and the Gate of Fideneæ by Nibby. There

was another gate on the southern side of the city, between the Piazza d'Armi and the Mill—perhaps a third.

believe that this is the site of the earliest town. Here alone could the founder of Veii have fixed his choice. The natural strength of its position, and its size, adapted it admirably for an infant settlement. In process of time, when its population increased, it was compelled to extend its limits, and gradually embraced the whole of the adjoining table-land, which is far too extensive to have been the original site, and what was at first the whole town became eventually merely the citadel. Such was the case with Athens, Rome, Syracuse, and many other cities of antiquity. There may have been a second settlement at Isola, which may have united with that of the Arx to occupy the site of the celebrated city. Somewhat similar was the process at Rome, where the town of Romulus, confined at first to the circumscribed hill of the Palatine, united with the earlier town on the Capitoline, to extend their limits as one city over the neighbouring heights and intervening valleys.

I walked round the Piazza d'Armi, and from the verge of its cliffs looked into the beautiful glen on either hand, through which, far beneath me, wound the two streams which girded in Veii, and into the broader and more beautiful hollow, through which, after uniting their waters, they flowed, once as the far-famed Créméra,¹⁰ to mingle with the Tiber. Peculiar beauty was imparted to these glens by the rich autumnal tints of the woods, which crowned the verge or clothed the base of their red and grey cliffs—the dark russet foliage of the oaks, the orange or brilliant red of the mantling vines, heightened by the contrast of the green meadows below. Scarcely a sign of cultivation met the eye—one house alone on

¹⁰ Now generally called La Valca by the peasantry. The larger and more northerly stream is the Fosso di For-

mello, the other the Fosso de' due Fossi.

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the opposite cliff—no flocks or herds sprinkled the meadows beneath—it was the wild beauty of sylvan, secluded nature.

Far different was the scene that met the eye of Camillus, when he gazed from this spot after his capture of Veii.¹ The flames ascending from the burning city²—the battle and slaughter still raging—the shouts of the victors and shrieks of the vanquished—here, his victorious soldiers pressing up through the hollow ways into the city, eager for spoil—there, the wretched inhabitants flying across the open country—yon height, studded with the tents of the Roman army—the Crémera at his feet rolling reddened down the valley towards the camp of the Fabii, whose slaughter he had now so signally avenged—all these sights and sounds melted the stern warrior to tears of mingled pity and exultation. Veii, so long the rival of Rome, had fallen, and her generous conqueror mourned her downfall. Like Troy, she had held out for ten long years against a mighty beleaguering army: and like Troy she fell at last only by the clandestine introduction of an armed foe. Where force was powerless, artifice prevailed.

The story of the *cuniculus*, or mine of Camillus, is well known; how he carried it up into the temple of Juno within the citadel—how he himself led his troops to the assault—how they overheard the Etruscan *aruspeæ*, before the altar of the goddess, declare to the king of Veii that victory would rest with him who completed the sacrifice—how they burst through the flooring, seized the entrails and bore them to Camillus, who offered them to the goddess with his own hand—how his troops swarmed in through the mine, opened the gates to their fellows, and

¹ Plut. Camil. Dionys. Frag. Mai. Livy (V. 21) seems to imply that the Roman soldiers set it on fire.

² The city was not consumed, but

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obtained possession of the city.³ Verily, as Livy sapiently remarks, "It were not worth while to prove or disprove these things, which are better fitted to be set forth on a stage which delighteth in marvels, than to be received with implicit faith. In matters of such antiquity, I hold it sufficient if what seemeth truth be received as such."

I wandered round the *Arx* seeking some traces of this temple of Juno, which was the largest in Veii.⁴ The sole remains of antiquity visible, are some foundations at the edge of the plateau, opposite the city, which may possibly be those of the celebrated temple, though more probably, as Gell suggests, the substructions of towers which defended the entrance to the citadel.⁵ Several sepulchral monuments have been here discovered ; among them one of the Tarquitian family, which produced a celebrated writer on Etruscan divination,⁶ and which seems from this and other inscriptions to have belonged to Veii. As none of these relics were Etruscan, they in no way militate against the view that this was the *Arx*, but merely show that it was without the bounds of the Roman *municipium*.

Of the *cuniculus* of Camillus no traces have been found. Not even is there a sewer, so common on most Etruscan sites, to be seen in the cliff beneath the *Arx*, though the dense wood which covers the eastern side of the hill may well conceal such an opening ; and one cannot but regard these sewers as suggestive of the *cuniculus*, if it were not even a mere enlargement of one of them to admit an armed force. Researches after the *cuniculus* are not likely to be successful. Not that I agree with Niebuhr in doubt-

³ Liv., loc. cit. Plut. Camil. Flor. Jupiter and Minerva. Serv. Æn. I. 426. I. 12.

⁵ Ann. Inst. 1830, p. 119.

⁴ Plut. Camil. It was probably united, as usual in Etruscan cities, with those of

⁶ Plin. N. H. I. lib. II. Macrob. Saturn. III. 7. cf. II. 16.