

‘Whitewashing’ the Samnites:
Roman Imperialism and the Modern Legacy of Empire
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Abstract: The rise of Rome serves as the driving paradigm behind most scholarly works on central and southern Italy in the first millennium BCE. The peoples of these regions, often ‘othered’ in contrast to Roman civilisation, are portrayed as an inconvenient disruption to Rome’s inevitable domination. This paper traces the pervasiveness of romanocentric constructions of the Samnites, connecting them to wider systemic issues of underrepresentation within the fields of classics and ancient history. In doing so, this paper offers new readings of the Samnites as an independent community with its own cultural traditions, infrastructure, and agency, thus drawing attention to an unrelenting legacy of whiteness and academic imperialism.

Keywords: Samnites, Roman imperialism, decolonising classics, romanisation, archaeology of Samnium.

Introduction

The rise of Rome serves as the driving paradigm behind most scholarly works on central and southern Italy in the first millennium BCE. The peoples of these regions are often seen as little more than an inconvenient disruption to Rome’s inevitable domination. The story of Rome’s conquest of Italy in this period can be traced back to the ancient source material, where Roman exceptionalism is typically defined in relation to the demise of Rome’s enemies. Within this paradigm, groups and peoples are defined by reductive labels in dichotomised relationships.¹ For many reasons long recognised in modern scholarship, the authors of our ancient sources often characterised groups outside of their dominant axes of power as the ‘Other’.² This is especially true for ‘the Samnites’, the label given to peoples who fought against Rome in a series of conflicts between 343 and 290 BCE, and whose defeat and incorporation marked a key turning point in the creation of Rome’s Italian empire.

More recently, other imperial biases have also been at work. Research on these regions of Italy has largely been driven by German and anglophone scholars, and, thus, guided by modern colonial frameworks present in these academic schools. A key feature of this trend is the (re-)entrenchment of ancient tropes that diminish non-Roman groups and centre Rome’s imperial domination of the region. This is true of scholarship concerned with many areas and periods of Roman expansion, but has yet to be fully confronted with regard to Rome’s early empire in Italy. This poses an issue, for historians discuss the fifth to third centuries with the predeterminant view that the Roman expansion throughout Italy was an inevitable, almost teleological outcome.³

¹ Livy books 7–10; see also Strabo book 5; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 15.5.17–18.1–3; Orosius 3.8.1; Florus 1.11.1–7, 1.12.1.

² Dench 1995; Bradley 1997; 2001; Isayev 2010; 2017; Gruen 2011; 2020.

³ La Regina 1980; De Felice 1994; Barker 1995a, 197–199, 201; Calì *et al.* 2011, 87, 91, 107–108; Robinson 2021.

Such discourse has often been underscored by the othering and centring of Italian groups relative to the Romans: one such group are the Samnites. The Samnites were inhabitants of central and southern Italy who resided along the central Apennine mountains. Most surviving textual sources on the Samnites were written long after the key events (such as the Samnite Wars, Punic Wars and Social War), and Samnite existence in these texts has largely been reduced to their military interaction with Rome—a foil against which Roman character could be built.⁴ This group has been characterised by ancient sources as a barbarian Other or stubborn, rustic mountain tribe: *montani atque agrestes* (Livy 9.13.7). Consequently, all Samnite activity is ascribed to an unavoidable fate; Samnite cities consolidated in preparation for conflict with Rome, trade networks were established to connect to Rome’s wider network, and so on.⁵ Confirmation bias has therefore dictated how scholarship has typically interpreted ancient evidence, which has resulted in an unnuanced and romanocentric approach to Italy in the first millennium BCE—one that clearly favours the imperial power.⁶

Historical and contemporary systemic issues validate and perpetuate this culture of exclusion and the scholarly bias that comes with it. Thus, intentionally or not, historians have both preserved the inherent bias and discrimination present in those ancient sources, and indeed arguably exacerbated it in modern works. The modern academic conversation has become cyclical, limited by the dominance of the romanocentric narrative. This homogeneity in academic thought, although perhaps more evident in this area than others, is nevertheless symptomatic of wider issues within the discipline.⁷ While dominant narratives are often challenged first by people who fall outside of the traditional power structures that uphold them, such voices (naturally in opposition to and critical of the *status quo*) have long been absent in this area. This paper examines this relationship between the systemic underrepresentation within Roman republican studies and the dominance of romanocentric narratives on the historiography of Samnium. It investigates the propagation of these issues, and how they have become part of an essentialist system that retains its colonialist frameworks despite its purported attempts to be free of it.

Although there have been some attempts to challenge these pervasive colonial narratives through an increase in engagement with decolonial approaches in Roman history, their application to early Roman studies and military history has generally been limited.⁸ For my approach, I take my cue from the work of García Peña (2022) 84–89:

what we consider to be standard curriculum, what generations of humans who received Western education have learned, is grounded in white supremacy but masked as objectivity. Ethnic studies is charged with filling in the immense gaps left by our Eurocentric education system, contradicting its violence, changing the narrative. [...] Ethnic studies brings forth silenced

⁴ Livy 7.29, 7.31.7–12, 8.22.7–10, 8.23.1–10, 8.25.5–26.6, 8.36.11–37.2, 8.37.3–6, 9.14.8–16, 9.21.1–6, 10.11.11–12.3, 10.31.1–7, 10.39.11–17, 22.61, 31.7; see also Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 15.5, 17–18.1–3; Orosius 3.8.1; Florus 1.11.1–7, 1.12.1.

⁵ Terrenato 2019, 140–142.

⁶ Laurence 2012, 2–12.

⁷ Kelly *et al.* 2019; Kamash 2019; Thonemann 2019; Leonard & Lovatt 2020.

⁸ For issues around the term ‘decolonisation’, see Tuck & Yang 2012.

knowledge, all stories and histories that have not been the norm or as objective truth.⁹

It is not enough to be decolonial—we must be anti-colonial to break down the constructions that dictate which voices are neutral or objective, and therefore which interpretations of evidence are accepted as the default. Confronting the history of Whiteness in early Roman studies allows for these prejudiced frameworks to be unmasked.¹⁰ It opens the dialogue to consider alternate worldviews from scholars traditionally marginalised by the academy, welcoming their experiences, worldviews, and histories as valuable. With these new perspectives come new understandings of ancient communities once relegated to the fringes, and ultimately a re-evaluation of our understanding of Italy in the first millennium BCE. Changing the narrative in this respect involves shifting the focus beyond the violence and inevitability of Roman empire, and instead studying communities, relationships to land and place, and networks of connection. If we take up this mantle for central and southern Italy, the purported ‘barbarian’ Samnite communities are a good place to start.

Modern scholarship by southern Italians has, in contrast to scholarship from elsewhere, recognised Samnite autonomy and explored the Samnites beyond their role as an antithetic enemy of Rome, with considerable weight given to Samnium as a region by local archaeologists, who have identified advanced economic, religious, and domestic infrastructure.¹¹ This archaeology, however, still requires a historical framework to give context to the material evidence, and it is this historical context that is currently under investigation.

This paper explores the cultural features imposed on the Samnites by both ancient sources and modern scholars. Exploring and recognising these cultural features clears the way for challenging the prevailing obstacles in the discipline and artificial paradigms imposed by coloniality. By investigating this narrative, this paper recentres the Samnites and highlights the prominence of a paradigm that privileges invasion and imperialism as agents of change, and explores how scholarship has been shaped by such frameworks. Part i. addresses the racialising paradigms that underlie western research frameworks, and highlights how these foundations have consequently led euro-american scholarship to centre triumphalist narratives of Roman ascendancy. Part ii. posits that ancient Roman imperialism set the terms for the surviving textual constructions of the Samnites as an Other to Rome. Part iii. argues that the uncritical overreliance of euro-american scholarship on romanocentric literary constructions is rooted in colonialist western research frameworks, which set Roman imperialism as an inevitable conquest over the ‘lesser’ Other. Part iv. presents the brief case studies of archaeological evidence from Monte Pallano,

⁹ García Peña (2022: 89) continues by identifying the importance of bringing in indigenous perspectives on processes of colonisation and others who understand capitalism as a racial system of oppression.

¹⁰ I have capitalised the terms ‘White’ and ‘Whiteness’ throughout this article, following the lead of Sirleaf (2023) to render Whiteness visible. In capitalising ‘White’ and ‘Whiteness’, we are removing the neutrality and therefore the power that grants Whiteness its invisibility; ‘White’ is as much a historically created racial identity as ‘Black’ and therefore should be named as such. The label ‘Other’ is thus treated similarly. On the other hand, I have chosen to use lowercase for the terms ‘western’ and ‘eurocentric’ as an act of resistance, to decentre and disrupt notions of western superiority in colonialist linguistic discourse, in line with Lenette (2022, 3) and Bhattacharya (2022, 205 n. 3). See Tuhiwai Smith 2012, who urges ‘researching back’ and disrupting colonial methods of practice in the academy.

¹¹ Capini 1991a; 1991b; Capini & Di Niro 1991a; Cianfarani *et al.* 1978; D’Agostino 1980; De Benedittis 1974; 1987; 1988; 1991a; 1991b; 2008; 2010; De Benedittis & Di Niro 1995; De Felice 1994; 1997; La Regina 1970; 1980; 1981; 1984; 1989; 1991; Tagliamonte 1994; 1996; 2007; Di Niro 1991a; 1991b; 1993; Stelluti 1997; 2009.

Fontecampana, and Larinum as archaeological evidence for the Samnites. I highlight where ancient literary representations of the Samnites have been distorted by Roman sources, and venture to challenge where modern scholarship has uncritically accepted these romanocentric representations. Ultimately, throughout this paper and explicitly in part v., I demonstrate that approaches to ancient Samnium would benefit from a re-evaluation of both the extant sources *and* scholarship, the latter having been limited thus far by its uncritical adoption of ancient narrative and limited problematising of the western frameworks within which it operates.

i. 'Whiteness' and its Academic Implications

'Romanisation', 'Roman colonialism', 'expansion', 'occupation', 'imperialism', and 'conquest' all centre Rome and place Roman hegemony in an oppositional binary to 'native' populations, in line with western epistemologies.¹² This western approach is, according to Hall (1992) and others, grounded in functions based on discourses of 'the west and the Rest',¹³ which characterises and categorises societies based on their perceived proximity to the west. In this framework, communities are stereotyped, dichotomised, and evaluated as either desirable (i.e. 'western' = good) or undesirable (i.e. 'non-western' = bad).¹⁴ This idealisation of the west has underpinned the selection and interpretation of source material in scholarship, dictating *how* one reads it. 'Western research' of this ilk brings with it specific lenses regarding cultural orientation, values, conceptualisations of intangible factors like time, space, subjectivity, and different traditions of knowledge, language, and power structures.¹⁵ This has consequently impacted how many societies are characterised and treated by western historians. For instance, notions of race are often propagated and utilised to buttress colonial systems of empire, and colonialism and essentialism are ingrained in modern conversations regarding Roman republican studies,¹⁶ with both of these things compounding and contributing to romanocentric narratives.¹⁷

The history of Rome's expansion has predominantly been written by 'men of privilege'—individuals who benefit from a system built to maintain power and keep the control of resources in the hands of the White male.¹⁸ Consequently, these scholars have often projected their contemporary understanding of imperialism, and, naturally, their world views and lived experiences onto the ancient Roman past. They assumed Rome fought wars and urbanised Italy, just as Prussia, the United Kingdom, and other colonial powers conquered, colonised, and 'civilised' their own neighbours, before moving on to states further afield in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries CE. This is also a

¹² See Versluys 2014, 9 for a discussion of these terms.

¹³ Hall 1992; Hulme 1986; Tuhiwai Smith 2012.

¹⁴ Those considered developed or urban and therefore western are placed in opposition to societies that are rural or agricultural, and therefore deemed under-developed or 'non-western'. See Hall 1992, 215; Tembo (2022).

¹⁵ Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 44–49.

¹⁶ Both terms are used across a range of disciplines, and it is generally recognised that colonialism is one of many expressions of imperialism. See Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 22.

¹⁷ Mac Sweeney *et al.* 2019, 2.

¹⁸ Kendall 2006, 63.

dominant thread that underlies American scholarship on the subject, mirroring modern American imperialist rhetoric and activity.

For instance, scholarly interest in the ancient Roman past was driven by a desire to find ancient solutions to the issues of empire.¹⁹ Enlightenment thinkers, particularly in Germany, regularly turned to ancient Rome for historical parallels to legal, expansionist, and agrarian issues of their time. Academic explorations into ancient structures of landholding found consonance in Rome's rise to power, growth of empire, and systems for the control of land by elites, providing—in their view—an ancient mirror to contemporary Prussian society. Amongst these writers was Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776–1831) whose work was instrumental for Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903), both of whom have produced some of the most influential works for western scholarship on Roman expansion. Thus, the foundations of modern contemporary scholarship on ancient Roman expansion, and Roman republican history more generally, are rooted in these eighteenth-century contexts of western imperialism.²⁰

Modern and ancient concepts of race are intimately connected; interwoven such that one will typically precede the other. By the mid-nineteenth century, far-right groups began to claim and weaponise their perceived classical heritage, and the discourse around the classical 'foundation of western civilisation' became a symbolic point of reference for its traditional associations with elites, imperialism, and an established social order.²¹ This vision has also been associated with various far-right and fascist ideologies of the early and mid-twentieth century.²² Scholars and works framed by this classical ideology, such as Mommsen, continue to be cited today, forming the foundation of modern scholarly discourse. The Graeco-Roman world continues to be strongly affiliated with European colonialism as the classical world was intrinsically connected with the values that drove this imperialism.²³

In the nineteenth century, this construction of 'western civilisation' actively produced an academic climate that privileges the voices of empire, and this continues to pervade current academic discourses, where colonial research and western frameworks have dictated whose voices are privileged within the discipline. How this influences the way classicists approached race—both in the ancient world and within the modern discipline—is apparent in reactions that followed the release of Bernal's *Black Athena* (1987).²⁴ In an edited collection of responses to *Black Athena* published in 1996, Lefkowitz asserted the premise that Afrocentrism was founded in bias, emotion, and the need of African academics to 'buy into' ancient Greece's cultural legacy. Afrocentrism was also contrasted with the 'objectivity' of classics, and 'European methods of distinguishing fact from fiction'.²⁵ Lefkowitz and other

¹⁹ The turn towards industrialisation in the 1830s heightened tensions across Europe between the peasant class, the emergent educated middle-class, and the traditional landed nobility (the *Junker* class).

²⁰ Bozzone and Negro 2025, 40–42.

²¹ Mac Sweeney *et al.* 2019, 16.

²² As explored recently by Curtis Dozier in *The White Pedestal* (2026).

²³ Cf. Goff 2013, especially 21–64; Eccleston and Padilla Peralta 2022; McCoskey 2022; Umachandran 2022; Umachandran and Ward 2023; Machado 2024.

²⁴ Bernal was himself problematic, defending his provocative title by quoting his publisher, 'Blacks no longer sell. Women no longer sell. But black women still sell!' (1989: 31–32). *Black Athena*, and the surrounding discourse, was criticised by classicists like Gress (1989), who asserted that the university was 'under attack' by 'anti-European cultural arrogance... from black racist attempts to impose indoctrination in the place of teaching and scholarship'.

²⁵ Lefkowitz 1996, 7 in Lefkowitz & Rogers (eds.), 1996.

euro-american classicists therefore set up an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy in order to attack those who sought to decentre the west from studies of the ancient Mediterranean and thus challenge the supposed European or monocultural foundations of western civilisation.²⁶ Dichotomies such as the ‘emotional and irrational People of Colour and their politicisation of history’, and ‘the reasonable and objective White person’ were adopted as a tool for the defence of the exclusionary practices in the discipline.

In response, certain disciplinary factions have avoided engaging with ‘race’, ignoring or glossing over the racist foundations of the discipline under the ruse that these sentiments are no longer part of ‘the canon we read or implicated in the theories and models we use to think with’.²⁷ These claims have been challenged by meaningful discussions of race in academia and call for reform of the discipline—conversations primarily driven by scholars from racialised backgrounds.²⁸ Although often expressed more subtly today, ‘the classical’ perseveres as a trope used to bolster and reinforce notions of authority, order, and status. Such inequities continue to undermine efforts to improve accessibility and inclusion within the discipline.²⁹ Classical studies, ancient history, Greek, and Latin have been used to justify and vindicate iniquitous systems of imperialism,³⁰ extremist regimes, and Whiteness.³¹ Furthermore, inherited prejudices, both ancient and modern, continue to influence how scholars interpret the ancient evidence.³² Literary sources are particularly susceptible to misrepresentation, where inaccurate connotations and prejudices can be written into racialised translations.³³ The limited view of the Samnites is but one symptom of the wider ethical problems of elitism and the lack of diversity in the discipline of classics and ancient history.

Such limited views are resultant from modern interpretations, which are shaped by contemporary sociopolitical climates, and frame our understanding of ancient material. This paper identifies some instances where the kinds of systemic exclusion described here have limited the scholarly voices, and demonstrates that western research frameworks have shaped studies on central and south Italian groups during this period. The Samnites provide an ideal case study of the implications of this pervasive modern colonial framework. The textual construction of Samnium and the Samnites will now be examined to demonstrate

²⁶ Rogers 1996, 428–429.

²⁷ McCoskey 2018.

²⁸ Such as Haley 2009; Vasunia 2013; Chae 2018; Pandey 2018; Padilla Peralta 2019a, 2019b; Nguyen 2020, 2021; Agbamu 2023; Johnston 2023; Machado 2024; Padilla Peralta 2025.

²⁹ Publication rates of scholarship in the discipline reflect the dominance of White voices in academic discourses, see Kamash 2019.

³⁰ e.g. those that hierarchise gender, class, and race, and contribute to notions of superiority.

³¹ Conversely, the classics has also been weaponised for progressive change by activists and subaltern groups, including those calling for independence from the British Empire, Vasunia (2013: ch. 1).

³² Emily Wilson’s 2023 translation of the *Iliad*, for instance, seeks to address this in relation to characterisation of women in the poem.

³³ For instance, Richlin’s (2015) translates Plautus’ *Poenulus* as ‘Towelheads’. Haley (2021) has identified the tendency of North American translators to select modern racial slurs for their translations of ethnic labels in ancient texts—for example, translating Latin and Greek terms such as *Afros*, *Aethiopsis*, and ὁ γναφεὺς ἀνθρώπων as slurs rather than simple demonyms, as the ancient sources seem to have used them (Juvenal 8.120). Vasunia (2021) has also identified a similar theme in translations of the *Song of Solomon*, where the original Hebrew translates to ‘I am black and beautiful’, whereas Latin and Greek translations of the Bible often say, ‘I am black but beautiful’. Ethiopian translations of the Bible retain the ‘and’.

how Roman imperialism, and its later receptions, have set the terms for Samnite identity to be constructed as an Other.

ii. *Montani atque agrestes*? Samnite Identity and Roman Imperialism

As already noted, the ancient sources for ‘the Samnites’ are problematic at best. References to ‘the Samnites’ are sporadic, the earliest literary depictions coming from early-fourth-century BCE Greek sources.³⁴ These sources focus primarily on ethno-geographic descriptions of a Samnite *ethnos* and refer to peoples of the region of Samnium³⁵ as *Saunitai* (Σαυνῖται) (Philostratus, *FGrH* 556, fr. 41, 42 & Pseudo-Scylax, *Periplus*, 11, 12).³⁶ The majority of extant literary evidence comes from Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus in the late first century BCE.³⁷ However, there does not seem to be much Roman interest in the Samnites before the Social War (91–88 BCE), at which time the Samnites and Samnite identity played an important role in shaping the opposition to Rome. The ancient evidence is, therefore, limited in what it can reflect of the actual lived experiences of the Samnites and other marginalised communities. However, it certainly reveals that the labels of ‘Samnite’ and ‘Samnium’ were ascribed to a group or region by authors of the late Republic. Indeed, ‘Samnite’ served as an important early imperial trope used by Livy and others to explore and promote Roman excellence and unity. This is, in part, why the ancient sources *cannot* express exactly who was a ‘Samnite’ during this period, nor whether these labels reflect practices of self-identification.³⁸ Moreover, the geographic region of ‘Samnium’ is similarly unclear, existing as an amorphous intellectual construct, inexactly and variously imposed on the land—not even bounded by a river or a sea—and open to manipulation by ancient authors.

The Samnites exist within the narrative space as Rome’s opposition. The Latin sources (Livy 7–10, 22; Polybius 2.24; Florus 1.11.8) are mostly centred on Samnite interactions and conflicts with Rome, whereas the Greek sources (Strabo 5.4; Polybius 2.24; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 17–18.4.4) apparently took an ethnographic approach and emphasised the great resources of the Roman state.³⁹ Consequently, these annalists created

³⁴ Tagliamonte 2017, 421.

³⁵ The term also included people of Samnite descent resident in Campania, namely the *Lucanii* and *Brettii*, identified as distinct from the original Samnite settlers (Theopompus Historicus *FGrH* 115, fr. 204; Timaeus of Tauromenium transmitted via Strabo 5.4.12, 6.1.3, 6.1.6, 6.1.15). See Musti 1992; Dench 1995, 76–77; Tagliamonte 2017, 419.

³⁶ If later sources have accurately preserved this text. See also: Μυστία πόλις Σαυνιτῶν. Φίλιστος ἑνδεκάτω. οἱ οἰκήτορες Μυστιανοί (Stephanus Byzantius, *Ethnica*, Τύρηστα and Μυστία in *BNJ* 556, fr. 41, 42). See further Strabo 5.4.1–3, 5.4.8, 5.4.11–13, 6.1.2–3; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 15.5, 17–18.4.4; Polybius 1.7.3. Strabo also describes a Lucanian origin myth in which he places the Samnites as their *archegetai* (leaders or ‘co-founders’, Strabo 6.1.2–3). Mamertines are included under the Samnite umbrella by ancient sources, along with Lucanians and Campanians (Polybius 1.7.3; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 15.5).

³⁷ Livy 7–10, 22; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 15.5, 17–18.4.4; Strabo 5.4, 6.1.2–3; Polybius 1.7.3; 2.24; Florus 1.11.8.

³⁸ Ancient identity is a complex and layered concept; modern western notions of identity fail to acknowledge the nuance and diversity of the ancient Mediterranean, and cannot be accurately mapped onto the ancient world. See Bradley 1997; 2001; Isayev 2010; 2017; Gruen 2010; 2020; Roselaar 2012.

³⁹ Polybius lists the Samnites among the Italian allies at Rome’s disposal in 225. Florus describes the Romans celebrating twenty-four triumphs over the Samnites. Dionysius lists the Samnites among the Italian allies.

a historical framework based on the contemporary socio-political experiences of their class.⁴⁰ It is difficult to avoid these biases of identity and geography; for example, Livy’s (9.1.3–10) speeches by Samnite leaders provide only generalised criticisms of Rome, revealing little about the Samnites themselves.⁴¹ Thus, the question remains: who were the Samnites?

It is evident that the romanocentricity of the ancient evidence has conditioned academic reconstructions of central and southern Italy in the second half of the first millennium.⁴² Rome’s growing presence in the Italian peninsula and its victories over Pyrrhus and Hannibal throughout the third century BCE had ideological consequences for the peoples of Italy who became *rustici*.⁴³ Indeed, although a vital part of Rome’s emerging imperial system, the Italians were also constructed as barbarians in the literary sources (Plautus *Truculentus* 687ff.; Aristophanes *Thesmophoriazusae* 1001ff.),⁴⁴ with foreign languages depicted as unintelligible and indicative of intellectual deficiency.⁴⁵ Just as the Greeks reasserted their centrality and primacy within groups of surrounding barbarians, the Romans asserted their superiority to the Italian peoples through the polarity of ‘urbanitas–rusticitas’ (Cicero *De oratore* 3.42–46; Plautus *Captivi* 879ff.). That is, ‘citified’ or urban wit or sophistication, in contrast to the boorishness or dullness of the country (Cicero *De oratore* 2.231; Plautus *Persa* 169; *Vidularia* 31–35; Terence *Adelphoe* 42–46).⁴⁶ This theme of primitivism persisted in Roman literary portrayals of the Italians and had both positive and negative connotations through Livy’s *montani atque agrestes*. Literary appearances of the Samnites therefore constituted careful literary constructions. These barbaric tropes were commonly deployed from the late Republic; comparisons were drawn between the superiority of the Romans and othered groups,⁴⁷ such as Roman *virtus*;⁴⁸ Roman piety (Tacitus *Annales* 3.55.8ff.); divine support for Roman causes (Livy 9.1.1–16; 10.37.13–16); and the use of historical figures as moral exemplars. Samnite identity is established by Roman constructions of a rural and barbarian Other juxtaposed against Roman urbanity, sophistication, excellence, and morality.

Central Italians were not only depicted negatively; positive Samnite attributes, for instance, were emphasised in later sources to lament the immorality of Rome, revealing an important aspect emphasised in the surviving literature. Ancient Roman authors possessed the opportunity and power to construct opponent identities and representations in such a way as to give the Romans greater moral standing—either by comparison with the barbaric

⁴⁰ McDonald 2026, 47.

⁴¹ Bradley & Hall 2017, 192; Oakley (1995: 9 n. 105) asserted that ‘no one has ever doubted’ that Caiatia was Samnite despite there being no evidence to prove it. For an exception see Horky (2011: 119–147) who argues that the speeches of Herennius Pontius are representative of cross-cultural transmission of practical philosophy about friendship, and thus provide an insight into Samnite ideals.

⁴² Bradley & Hall 2017, 192; cf. McDonald (2026) for a discussion of ‘linguistic racism’.

⁴³ Perhaps most aptly captured as ‘rustic’, on the grounds of their *rusticitates*: their rusticity or boorishness, see Dench (1995: 74–76) for a comprehensive explanation. This has been conflated with a ruralism prescribed to Italian communities in modern scholarship.

⁴⁴ Dench 1995, 73–75.

⁴⁵ Hall 1989, 19, 122.

⁴⁶ Ramage 1960; Dench 1995, 75.

⁴⁷ Bradley & Hall 2017, 192; Tagliamonte 1996, 137; McDonald 2026.

⁴⁸ Sallust *BJ* 85 for Marius on the ‘elites’ (*nobiles*); Wiseman 1971, 113 on *novi homines* (new elites elected to office) and the virtues of the ‘central-Italian hill-people’.

Other, or through their ability to prevail over opponents with perceived ‘worthy’ traits.⁴⁹ In Virgil’s *Georgics* (2.458–542), his Latins lived in desirable simplicity, free from the corruption of the modern city.⁵⁰ His simple agricultural society of the past contrasts the discord of his contemporary Rome, and is bookended by descriptions of the rural lives of Sabines and Etruscans. Positive depictions also pervade the annalistic sources of the late Republic and early Empire. These included depictions of the central Italians as brave, rustic, and masculine,⁵¹ characterised according to Herodotus’ ethnographic system as austere and rugged soldiers from rough lands (Livy 9.13.7; Herodotus 9.122.3).⁵² Livy (9.13.7–10) includes a passage that has generally been taken at face value to suggest that either Samnite society was organised around raiding by the ‘rugged mountain-people’,⁵³ or that this was the Roman understanding of Samnite society.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, these interpretations still emphasise dichotomies of ‘affluent, non-rural’, versus ‘poor, pastoral, rural’;⁵⁵ disparities between the Samnites and their neighbours that support the narrative of Roman imperialism. Dench, however, has identified that this passage is also about the varieties of economy that existed in the region, highlighting the terms *culti* and *agrestes*: pastoralists and agriculturalists. The agriculturalists are the ‘softer characters’ of the plains, whereas the Samnites are ‘rough mountain-dwellers’. Particularly explicit here is Livy’s employment of geographical determinism to explain the behaviours of the Arpi and Samnites during their conflict.⁵⁶ The phrase *montani atque agrestes* is just one description of the Samnite peoples, and should not be privileged in historical discussions of Samnite society above other descriptions.

Livy’s contradictory presentation of Samnite primitivism and *luxuria* (extravagance or excess) echoes Greek patterns of othering through the emphasis of excess.⁵⁷ Livy (9.40; 10.39.11–14) emphasises the resplendence of Samnite arms by describing their adornment with gold and juxtaposing it with Roman (or Greek) masculinity.⁵⁸ These descriptions are more than just a trope; they seem to fit late-fourth-century BCE iconographic representations of south Italian battledress.⁵⁹ The Augustan context for Livy’s work is clear: Livy selected elements of Samnite dress and practice for manipulation within pre-existing patterns of characterisation.⁶⁰ Livy’s Samnites straddle the distance between foreignness and familiarity, continuing to fulfil their narrative role as a barbarian Other while also becoming

⁴⁹ Dench 1995, 67–68.

⁵⁰ Hall 1989, 149.

⁵¹ Dench 1995, 67. See Strabo 5.4.2 for bravery of Vestini, Marsi, Paeligni, Marrucini, and Frentani. See also Virgil *Georgics* 2.167ff.; Pliny (the Elder) *Naturalis historia* 3.106; Appian *Bella civilia* 1.46.

⁵² Dench 1995, 68.

⁵³ Livy 9.13.7–9: ‘for the Samnites, who in those days dwelt in villages among the mountains, used to ravage the regions of the plain and coast, despising their cultivators, who were of a softer character, and one that—as often happens—resembled their country, while they themselves were rude highlanders’. Trans. Foster.

⁵⁴ Salmon 1967, 77; Lloyd 1991, 180; Barker, Lloyd and Webley 1978, 43; Dench 1995, 114.

⁵⁵ Dench 1995, 114.

⁵⁶ Dench 1995, 114–115.

⁵⁷ Stek 2009, 37.

⁵⁸ Dench 1995, 45.

⁵⁹ For full discussion see Rouveret 1986, 103ff.; conversely, Wiseman (1979: 73–76) argues that Livy and his contemporaries had fabricated most of the events in Rome’s history up to the second century.

⁶⁰ Dench 1995, 100.

recognisable—and therefore acceptable—allies, as adjudged by the first-century CE Augustan audience.⁶¹

Livy's description of the topography and architecture of Samnite settlements is similarly nuanced. Walled settlements are described as either *urbes* (cities) or *oppida* (towns).⁶² *Oppida* has also been translated to denote 'defensible hilltop fortifications'.⁶³ This term is used by Livy to refer to several cities and towns across the Mediterranean, and usually appears within the context of war. Despite Livy's wider use of the term, polygonal walling in central and southern Italy has generally been seen as an indication of these *oppida*.⁶⁴ These walls are difficult to date, and the proliferation of *oppida* in southern Italy is largely regarded as a fourth-century BCE phenomenon.⁶⁵ It is therefore puzzling when scholars use the term to distinguish Samnite fortifications as *oppida* and, by extension, use polygonal walling as a feature of Samnite settlement more generally. Empirical generalisations, such as the idea that polygonal walling is indicative of Samnite settlement or fortifications, betray the uncritical application of ancient literary tropes, and a modern western model of urbanism.⁶⁶

In sum, the Samnites have been defined as a 'disorganised and brutish mountain people', with 'luxurious tendencies', contrasted with the elegance and sophistication of the Romans. We will now see that these textual constructions have been propagated and reinforced by modern scholarship on this period.

iii. Ancient Tropes in Modern Scholarship

Modern scholars have all too often posed questions about the ethnic identity of the peoples of the central Apennines in terms of nineteenth-century theories of race. In their identification and discussion of primitive unities, they have assumed that the actions of peoples who lived hundreds of years after the periods covered by these supposed primitive unities were more or less determined by this pre-existing cultural unity. They have been frequently misled by the ancients themselves, who regularly expressed present relationships in terms of blood ties. I have argued that notions of identity are far from fixed and 'objective', and that questions of identity must be posed in such a way as to allow for the possibility of frequent regroupings according to individual circumstances.

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Central Italy has long been virtually synonymous with the community of Rome since the early modern period (1550–1796 CE). With the tremendous influence of the Catholic Church

⁶¹ The Social War in the first century BCE played a huge role in how the Samnites were conceptualised and discussed by the Romans. Stek 2009, 44–45; Dench 2005, 129.

⁶² Lee 2016, 9.

⁶³ La Regina 1970, 191–192.

⁶⁴ See Oakley 1995, 129; Lloyd *et al.* 1997, 32.

⁶⁵ Bispham 2007, 200. Livy uses *oppidum* when referring to Bovianum at 9.31.4–5; Aquilonia at 10.42.4, 10.43.13, 10.44.1–2; and Allifae, Callifae, and Rufrium at 8.25.4.

⁶⁶ Lee 2016, 2; Gualtieri (1987: 32–33) has argued that 'Samnite' fortified centres could not be classified as cities, nor as urban, because the Greeks and Romans would not have understood these decentralised settlement patterns as urban spaces. Samnite settlements therefore do not fit within the definitions of 'city' or 'urban' that Livy applied to other cultures across the Mediterranean.

in Rome and the city's reemergence as the political heart of Italy following unification in the nineteenth century, the region has never been able to escape the shadow of the ancient city. Southern Italy represents a counterpoint, yet one that also suffers from a modern Roman bias. The south has been less wealthy than its northern neighbours since the early modern period and has been economically exploited by Rome and the north of Italy for generations. The region saw limited professional archaeological activity until the 1970s, and has attracted little attention from Roman historians outside of being used as a touchstone for comparisons with Roman greatness. These regions, especially southern Italy, thus provide ideal case studies for illustrating how systemic exclusionary practices in the discipline have impacted academic output in studies on the Roman Republic.

The academic discussion of fourth-century BCE Italy focusses heavily on Rome's development and (largely military) interactions with Italian groups. This approach is relatively unilateral; it centres the impact of 'Rome' on local societies and presupposes dichotomies such as 'Roman' and 'Other', 'Roman' and 'native', 'Roman' and 'barbarian', 'rural' and 'urban', 'civilised' and 'uncivilised', and, as noted earlier, is scaffolded upon established ancient patterns and tropes, and a teleological trajectory towards a unified Italy under Roman control. This ancient influence on contemporary modern scholarship is further exacerbated by western and colonialist frameworks that have guided and shaped the work that has come before.

Mommsen, for example, divided, categorised, and organised Italian groups in accordance with their perceived relationship to the Roman empire, beginning *Römische Geschichte* (1887) by outlining ethnic categories for Italian 'tribes', 'races', or 'stocks' as a foundation for his historical discussion,⁶⁷ normalising an essentialist assumption that early Roman society was organised through innate ethnographic drivers.⁶⁸ Mommsen established Italian inferiority in contrast to the inescapable Roman conquest of Italy and Rome's inevitable global hegemony,⁶⁹ with his 'Samnites' representing the antithesis to Roman organisation and excellence through the use of the terms '*samnitischen Scharen*' or '*samnitischer Schwarm*': Samnite hordes or Samnite multitudes.⁷⁰ In contrast, Roman troops were discussed in terms of Roman armies and Roman settlers: '*Aussendung roemischer Kolonisten*'. Rome's early expansion was thus apparently born of an attempt to combat the perceived aggression of its neighbours;⁷¹ the Romans are portrayed as an organised and intrinsically structured society defending itself against the Samnite 'hill-people' who threatened what Mommsen called '*Roms Hegemonie*'.⁷² While Samnium's political organisation granted them the ability to challenge Roman hegemony, their ultimate defeat was—in Mommsen's view—caused by their

⁶⁷ Mommsen (1862: 7, 9–10) used philological evidence as the basis for his categorisations of ethnic groups. See Mommsen's bk I, ch. 2 for a full discussion.

⁶⁸ Niebuhr 1803–1806; Momigliano 1994, 232–233; Reill 1980, 19.

⁶⁹ 'Accordingly, the whole history of the two nations is prefigured in their diametrically opposite systems of colonization. Whatever the Romans gained was a gain to the state: the conquests of the Samnites were achieved by bands of volunteers who went forth in search of plunder, and, whether they prospered or were unfortunate, were left to their own resources by their native home'. Mommsen 1862, bk 2. Trans. Dickson.

⁷⁰ Mommsen 1862, bk II, ch. V. Likewise Mommsen's discussion of Gauls, Celts, Etrurians, and Sabines.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 7.

⁷² *ibid.*, 361.

lack of organisation around a central governing body.⁷³ For Mommsen, Samnite success was measured against Roman forms of organisation and governance.

A century later, ancient characterisations of a poor and disorganised Samnium were adopted in Salmon’s *Samnium and the Samnites* (1967) to contextualise his archaeological survey. Depopulation of the area in the 1960s and 1970s only compounded the biases further, with studies on the Samnites from this period mirroring the contemporary region’s poverty and marginality.⁷⁴ However, the rise of archaeology in the 1960s afforded the Samnites increasing agency in historical reconstructions, recognising them as a living community who existed beyond their role in Roman imperial narratives. That said, Salmon’s work opens by dichotomising the Samnites and Romans: ‘of all the tribes and nations with whom the Romans found themselves obliged to dispute the supremacy of Italy, none were more formidable than the Samnites of Samnium’.⁷⁵ This juxtaposition is carried throughout Salmon’s work, perpetuating ancient preconceptions of the Samnites such as *opikoi*,⁷⁶ or Livy’s stubborn mountain-tribe, the *montani atque agrestes*. Salmon’s work, although sympathetic to the Samnites in some ways, sets up the Roman conquest of the Samnites as inevitable, and their ‘unification’ into Rome’s empire as ‘pre-destined’.⁷⁷

Coinciding with south Italy’s recovery and increased archaeological activity following World War II, there was an upsurge in research on the Samnites. This archaeological reappraisal, as well as the independent *regione* status granted to Molise in 1970, instigated a desire to construct a local identity. Southern Italian academics saw merit in connecting with their own regional identity in a meaningful way that was separate from and distinct to Roman heritage.⁷⁸ Adriano La Regina, for instance, has highlighted alternatives to urban models of settlement organisation in the region, and shed light on cultural interactions between groups in Italy through examinations of art and architecture.⁷⁹ La Regina emphasised Samnite idiosyncrasy and regional variation throughout central and southern Italy, contending that the Pentrians partook in elaborate displays of wealth at sanctuary sites in contrast to more muted displays observed in spaces with civic or military functions,⁸⁰ and countering dominant narratives of a homogenous and unsophisticated Samnite people. Gianluca Tagliamonte similarly has argued for distinctive community traits in relation to culture and socio-political organisation.⁸¹ This interest in regional Samnite identities has been driven by Italian voices, further demonstrating the value of diversifying the scholarly discourse. Despite this growing appreciation of central Italian regional differences, scholars have generally continued to emphasise Samnite otherness.⁸²

In 1995 three pivotal books were published, *The Hill-forts of the Samnites* by Stephen P. Oakley, *A Mediterranean Valley: Landscape Archaeology and Annales History in the Biferno Valley* by Graeme Barker, and *From Barbarians to New Men* by Emma Dench. Livy’s propensity to

⁷³ *ibid.*, 123–124.

⁷⁴ Dench 1995, 8 n. 26; Scopacasa 2015, 3–4.

⁷⁵ Salmon 1967, i.

⁷⁶ *Opikoi* referred to peoples who could not properly speak Greek. Dubuisson 2001, 1–16.

⁷⁷ Dench 2004b, 45.

⁷⁸ Dench 1995, 8.

⁷⁹ La Regina 1970; 1976.

⁸⁰ La Regina 1976, 229.

⁸¹ Tagliamonte 1997; 2000.

⁸² Dench 1995, 8–11; Lloyd 1991, 184; Patterson 1991, 146ff.; Morel 1991, 187ff.

emphasise and invent Roman successes (and therefore augment Roman exceptionalism) while omitting Samnite achievements is generally accepted by Oakley,⁸³ who used ethnographic and historical records (primarily Livy) to identify potential Samnite hillforts. The residual polygonal walling is then recorded as the primary indicator of Samnite hillfort constructions (*oppida*). Oakley's conflation of polygonal walling with rural fortifications and thus 'primitive' or 'uncivilised' societies exemplifies the impact of empirical generalisation and colonial binaries.⁸⁴ This circular form of reasoning, however, does not stack up with the archaeological evidence, as demonstrated by the case studies of Monte Pallano and Larinum, discussed in part iv below.

Barker's survey of the Biferno valley also reflects the tendency to fall back on the Roman literary construction of the Samnites to contextualise the archaeology;⁸⁵ the work relies heavily on modern understandings of societal organisation. For instance, Barker acknowledges that the forum at Saepinum was built by a Samnite, C. Papiu[s] but concludes that this is indicative of local Samnite families participating in the urbanisation and Romanisation of the region.⁸⁶ Although Barker's conclusions involve an acknowledgement of Samnium's substantial sphere of interaction throughout the Mediterranean through trade and mercenary involvement, this socioeconomic complexity is ultimately connected to urbanisation that Barker implies took place in anticipation of the Roman conquest.⁸⁷ The Samnites, Barker argues, became connected on account of Rome's world system.

Dench's work, on the other hand, represents something rather different, pushing for a re-evaluation of the central Apennines, challenging biases of modern historians and giving a voice to central Italian groups traditionally sidelined in the scholarship. Dench scrutinised ancient literary evidence and identified the literary tropes that have been consistently applied to the Samnites, demonstrating that the representation of the Samnites as a barbarian Other by the classical authors aligned with a wider pattern of othering 'foreign' groups. Furthermore, Dench's survey of modern English scholarship reveals the tendency to characterise Samnium as 'anti-classical' and the Samnites as the disorganised, rural antithesis to the Romans.⁸⁸ They are thus an early republican example of the barbarian Other. Indeed, when the Samnites are compared with the likes of the Celts, Gauls, or Britons—other so-called 'fringe groups'—it becomes apparent that the description of the 'barbaric tribes' has also been extended to the Samnites by Livy, Polybius, and other sources in antiquity. Unlike the Celts, Gauls, and Britons, however, this notion of the 'barbaric Samnite hill-tribes' has rarely been challenged by scholars, and notions of Samnium's autonomy and

⁸³ Tagliamonte 1996, 137.

⁸⁴ Oakley (1995: 11) 'rough fortifications made out of dry-stone walls, often the construction of *primitive* societies', emphasis added.

⁸⁵ Barker (1995a: 208) 'with only a few recent exceptions, ancient and modern assessments have presented the Samnites as a primitive pastoral and agrarian society'.

⁸⁶ Barker 1995a, 221. The concept of 'romanisation' can be augmented to acknowledge the roles of local societies and change over time; however, these interpretations remain confined by the frameworks that underpin them. See Mihajlović (2019: 1) for further discussion on romanisation and Fulminante (2014: ch. 7) on the limitations of urbanisation as a concept.

⁸⁷ Barker 1995a, 311–312.

⁸⁸ Dench 2005, 18–19.

independent identity have been sidelined in favour of a more traditional narrative of Roman imperialism. More recent publications on the Samnites have fallen into similar patterns.⁸⁹

Frustratingly, out of the three works that emerged in 1995, only those by Oakley and Barker seem to have made a substantial impact on wider anglophone discussions.⁹⁰ Dench's work, although influential in its own way, has been sidelined as a literary exploration of identity, despite the obvious challenge she has posed to the traditional historical narrative.⁹¹ The reasons for this are almost certainly varied, although it is worth again noting that the tropes that have hitherto confined current understandings of Samnium and the Samnites are also part of a wider set of colonialist ideals that have been shared and perpetuated by modern historians and archaeologists (see part i). The overreliance on these romanocentric ideals is a result of systemic factors that are pervasive not just within Roman republican studies, but also the wider disciplines of classics and ancient history. Scholarly contributions on early Roman expansion have been limited to a small group of voices, and consequently, arguments of the resulting scholarship have often become circular. It is noteworthy that Dench, the scholar who did challenge the 'automatic acceptance' of the ancient textual constructions of the Samnites, is a woman.

This critique of western research is not intended to dismiss or delegitimise the scholarly discourse on Roman imperialism and the Samnites to date, but rather to identify an issue that has heretofore largely been neglected in the subfields of ancient history and archaeology in particular: that the voices and contributions of individuals from underrepresented or historically marginalised groups have been missing from the conversation.⁹² Such systemic factors have had an impact on academic output and consequently restricted the discussion of Samnium and the early Roman Republic. The Samnites have been regarded through a simplified set of literary tropes that were crafted as part of the construction of an Other, a group that was juxtaposed with the Romans to serve

⁸⁹ Scopacasa's (2015) *Ancient Samnium* aims to bridge the discourse between the archaeology and ancient history. Although the book is comprehensive, some interpretations fall into confirmation bias in the search for Livy's mountain-warriors in the archaeological record. For example, Scopacasa references Musti (1984: 26) who discusses the 'colonisation' vocabulary used by the Greeks, a loaded and modern concept projected retrospectively onto the ancient past. Robinson (2021) argues for romanisation to be reframed as a multi-century long process rather than a sudden shift during the fourth century. Despite Robinson's focus on the autonomy and actions of local groups in Larinum, and consideration for gradual processes of interaction and transformation, the position presented ultimately relies on Rome's predetermined and inevitable hegemony.

⁹⁰ See the following from Barker & Suano *et al.* (1995: 160) 'the homeland of the Samnites, the renowned opponents of Rome (Salmon 1967). Although traditionally regarded as a backward and rustic people, archaeology shows that Samnite culture in the later centuries of the 1st millennium BC was far more complex than envisaged even a few years ago, with more or less urban structures developing before Romanization'. Also note from the passage the use of Salmon as an academic touchstone for the argument on Samnium's opposition to Rome.

⁹¹ A pattern identified and discussed in Skinner (1987: 187) whose articulation summarily encompasses the issue, 'the historic use of classical studies as a self-enhancing cultural emblem and a gatekeeping mechanism designed to control access to education and power explains its present appeal to reactionary elitists... knowledge that does not fit male disciplinary paradigms can be dismissed'.

⁹² Kamash (2019) examined the presenter programmes of twenty-two Roman Archaeology conferences from 1995 to 2019. Of the 2068 papers and posters presented over this period, only 2.4% were by individuals from BAME communities and Development Assistance Committee countries. Furthermore, 46% of papers presented over this period focussed on the regions of Britain and Italy, despite the Roman empire covering far wider geographical regions and groups.

a broader literary narrative. The use of categorisation (*barbaroi* or Other), stereotypes (feminine Persians or war-like Samnites), and stereotypical dualism (Roman versus foreign) can certainly be identified in the ancient sources. Modern understandings of the Samnites have been conditioned by these early imperial attitudes and consequently have framed the Samnites as the barbarian counterpart to Roman civilisation. The Samnites therefore reveal the degree to which (primarily German and anglophone) scholarship, entrenched in Whiteness, has fixated on Rome's ascendancy over Italy, a position grounded in an overreliance on romanocentric constructions of Italian groups and Samnite alterity. Yet, the surviving archaeological evidence pertaining to Samnium offers an alternate picture.

iv. The Archaeology of Samnium

Modern academic literature often assumes that cultural features are connected to wider ethnic distinctions, and that changes in cultural features are linked to invasion and decreases in local authority. In this reconstructed historical context, Samnium is predominantly viewed as either an opponent or vassal of Rome. Roman hegemony is established as the catalyst for any Samnite development. The geography and archaeology of Samnium paint an image contrary to that presented by the ancient historians, who often presented Samnium as isolated and fortified by its hilly terrain, mobility of a few elites notwithstanding.⁹³ The archaeology does not serve as a universal corrective to the literary evidence, and should not be considered as such. It does, however, offer an alternative, underrepresented view of Samnite spaces.

The Topography of Samnium

The Apennine mountains are a key defining feature of the central Italian region. The mountainous terrain encircles grassy plains, and plateaux and river valleys made ideal areas for grazing animals or land for agriculture.⁹⁴ The river valleys appear to have the densest areas of surviving archaeological material in the region, and therefore likely constituted the main axis of settlement during the first millennium. The most active lines of communication, however, did not only lie through the paths at the bottom of the valley, but also the transhumance trails situated along the mountain ridges that were used for seasonal relocations between mountain pastures in warmer months and lower altitudes in colder months. This geographical landscape therefore encourages transhumance, where flocks are moved in seasonal cycles between the lowland river valleys in the winter and the green pastures in the highlands in the summer. Transhumance trails acted as nexus points of cultural and economic activity in antiquity, and evidence socioeconomic systems of organisation;⁹⁵ and yet the existence of long-distance transhumance systems in antiquity

⁹³ Salmon 1967; Oakley 1995; Terrenato 2019, 270.

⁹⁴ Barker 1995a, 17–21.

⁹⁵ Tagliamonte 1996, 37–9; Salmon 1967, 17–18, 52, 55, 65–70; Barker (1976: 303) emphasised the prevalence of transhumance throughout central and southern Italy during this period; see also De Felice 1994, 34. While other scholars (Salmon 1967, 68–9; Tagliamonte 1996, 36–40; Roselaar 2017, 181) have pointed to Varro and other ancient literary references for flocks being moved between Samnium and Apulia to the east. Conversely, Scopacasa (2015: 14) has been more sceptical of the prevalence of long-distance transhumance trails in Samnium, as well as of their overall importance in the maintenance of socioeconomic networks in Samnium before the 'Samnite Wars', although this may partly be a result of his focus on built sites (an emerging feature of the archaeology that runs counter to the traditional narrative).

continues to be widely debated in the modern scholarship despite numerous attestations in the ancient sources (Cicero *Pro Cluentio* 59, 161; Varro, *De re rustica* 2.2.10, 3.17.9; Livy 22.14; Silius Italicus 7.365).⁹⁶ The interlocking valleys and network of rivers, mountain ridges, and upland passes facilitated mobility; Campania to the west and Umbria to the north would have been relatively accessible.

Monte Pallano and Fontecampana

On the right bank of the Sangro river lies the site of Monte Pallano (*Pallanum*), which rises above the Sangro river valley on a plateau overlooking the Adriatic coast.⁹⁷ The naturally fortified site presents several archaeological features that challenge the traditional image of the rustic and isolated Samnites and their underdeveloped warrior society. There is also evidence of pastoralism and remains of production sites in the region. Material finds indicate human occupation of the Monte Pallano site and its immediate surroundings from as early as the Bronze Age and continued use of the site until the fourth century CE. Bronze Age material was recovered from seven sites in the Monte Pallano area.⁹⁸ To the south-east of Monte Pallano sits a settlement on another plateau, known as Fontecampana.⁹⁹

Work on Monte Pallano has revealed a fortified centre as well as farmsteads—sites traditionally attributed to early Roman occupation—in the surrounding landscape and at Fontecampana in particular.¹⁰⁰ The Sangro river valley and Monte Pallano regions disappear from the ancient literary record after 80 BCE, when Sulla attacked the region. The megalithic walls on Monte Pallano have not been studied in detail, but they are interpreted as evidence of a Samnite fortified centre during this period.¹⁰¹ Driven by Livy's descriptions of Samnite settlements as *oppida*, the presence of Iron Age material near to polygonal walling is taken as an indication of a Samnite hillfort on the site.

Several smaller habitation sites were uncovered at Fontecampana and thought to be farmsteads that utilised the area's arable land.¹⁰² *Impasto* ceramic derived from earlier Iron Age burials has been recovered from the plateau here at the break of the slope between the wooded land and the farmable terrain.¹⁰³ This site sat at the junction of several heavily frequented routes and transhumance paths. Scholars have suggested that this location and large presence of 'Roman material' indicate that the site 'peaked' under the 'Roman period' as a hub for elite interaction.¹⁰⁴ It is unlikely that the site would have been suddenly abandoned by 'Samnites' and occupied by 'Romans' in their place given its history of

⁹⁶ Tagliamonte 1996, 36–40; Barker 1989; Corbier 1991, *passim*; De Felice 1994, 34; Sparacello *et al.* 2011.

⁹⁷ Monte Pallano has been confidently identified as the site of the ancient settlement *Pallanum*: see Miller 1916, 216; Colonna 1955, 169–70.

⁹⁸ Scatters 61, 62, 67, 65, 58, 18, and 91 in Lloyd *et al.* 1997, 179.

⁹⁹ Extensive archaeological material has been recovered from this site dating to the classical period. This included pottery of low-fired handmade ceramics, and late and crude-struck flints. Lloyd *et al.* 1997, 22–23; Bell *et al.* 2002, 179.

¹⁰⁰ Lloyd *et al.* 1997, 5–6; Bell *et al.* 2002, 178–180.

¹⁰¹ Bell *et al.* 2002, 180; Bispham 2001.

¹⁰² Bell *et al.* 2002, 183.

¹⁰³ Scatter 18. Bell *et al.* 2002, 180; Lloyd 1997.

¹⁰⁴ Supporting recent hypotheses concerning the importance of farmsteads as nuclei for elite communication and power in central and southern Italy over the fourth century. Terrenato 2019, 88; Lomas 2025, 240.

continuous occupation and well-established connections with the hilltop at Monte Pallano—a ‘Samnite’ regional site. Furthermore, the influx of ‘Roman material’ at the site could be attributed to movement, trade, or even local production; after all, as is now axiomatic, pots are pots, not people. While these may be inextricable from processes of imperialism, it is an oversimplification to condense Samnite culture, industry, and autonomy to Roman expansionism, and thereby reduce complex and multilayered communities to a trope: the uncivilised enemy of Rome.

The processing of wool was also likely as attested by literary sources which record wool production throughout Apulia, Samnium, and Campania,¹⁰⁵ and the archaeology of the region seems to support this idea that transhumance was an important aspect of the economy. Large material finds have been found at Pietrabbondante (south of Monte Pallano), where there is thought to have been a large Samnite sanctuary site and evidence of transhumant pasturing, and which may well have partially financed the second-century BCE sanctuary site.¹⁰⁶ Tagliamonte’s assertion, that the quantity of military dedications found here demonstrate a connection between the site and the Samnite army, have led academics to claim that the form and dimension of this space are similar to the space described by Livy (10.38), where the Samnites took oaths prior to the battle of Aquilonia.¹⁰⁷ A fragmented Oscan inscription dated to 125 BCE (*Imagines Italicae Terventum* 8) from the site bears the words *safinim sak[arakulud* (‘Samnium with a sanctuary he adorned’) and *keenzstur* (‘censor’).¹⁰⁸ It is thus likely that this structure served as a meeting place for Samnite communities.¹⁰⁹ These dedications also illustrate the use of the endonym *safin-*, indicating a sense of connection between community spaces, ritual or religion, patronage and therefore some degree of shared identity.¹¹⁰ A theatre-temple complex at Pietrabbondante has also been studied as evidence of communal investment;¹¹¹ with these buildings implying that the Samnites had developed socio-political organisation beyond their hillfort sites. Evidently, sophisticated infrastructure and a significant degree of movement existed in central Italy independent of Roman networks.

Larinum

The ancient site of Larinum has been upheld as an exception to the rest of central Italy in its development from the end of the fourth century BCE onwards, used as an example of a nexus of interaction and mobility that resisted Roman domination until the first century BCE, when it was given *municipium* status. Larinum has been labelled a city of ‘cultural ambiguity’ due

¹⁰⁵ Plautus *Truculentus* 3.1.5, *Pseudolus* 145; Varro *De lingua Latina* 9.39; Strabo *Geography* 5.1.12; Pliny (the Elder) *Naturalis historia* 8.7.191; Polybius 2.15.2.

¹⁰⁶ Dench 1995, 118–125; Evidence in the form of statuettes, inscriptions, and associations with salt provisions for herding animals and the preservation of meat on transhumance journeys. See Bradley 2005, 138–140.

¹⁰⁷ Tagliamonte 1994, 148–150; 2012, 101. Breastplate types, weapons, and bronze belts located at the site are thought to have belonged to Samnite mercenaries; Di Fazio 2017, 160–161.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. *Imagines Italicae Terventum* 1157; Herrera Rando 2019, 377.

¹⁰⁹ Tagliamonte 2012, 101; Scopacasa 2015, 206–207; Herrera Rando 2019, 377; Stek 2009, 40–41; Di Fazio 2017, 160–161.

¹¹⁰ Scopacasa 2015, 206–207 uses this as an example of the construction of *safin-* identity as an ‘Other’ in response or relation to pressures from surrounding ethnic groups.

¹¹¹ La Regina 1976; 1980.

to its liminal position between Daunia, Apulia, and Samnium, in an apparent refusal to acknowledge Samnite autonomy and achievement.¹¹² Larinum is located in the lower Biferno valley on a hill that intersects two catchment basins. The Biferno River (Latin *Tifernus*), lies to the north-west, where it is thought to have flowed on the eastern edge of Samnite land and at the intersection of Samnite and Apulian space, between the territories of the Frentani to the north and the Daunians to the south in Apulia.¹¹³ Larinum is mentioned in multiple ancient literary sources, which mostly discuss its integration into the Augustan *Regio II*.¹¹⁴ This literary narrative has clouded considerations of Larinum by modern scholars who, following their ancient predecessors, rarely look at the site beyond its Roman hegemonic context. Yet Larinum provides an ideal example of how the archaeological evidence challenges the textual.

Archaeological data on Larinum are readily available. Tomb assemblages can be dated to as early as the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE.¹¹⁵ Across the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, Larinum demonstrates ‘openness’ to northern Apulia, as demonstrated by the typology of imported Apulian products and funerary customs. At nearby Monte Arcano, for instance, burials contain grave goods that can be linked to Daunian and Peucetian centres during this time.¹¹⁶ Burial practices also reflect ‘Apulian practices’ of inhumation, such as positioning the deceased in a flexed position.¹¹⁷ These findings may indicate a process of self-identification by the Samnites during this period, demonstrated by the inhumation positions, typology of grave goods, and clustered burials. The continuous occupation of Larinum by local family groups is further supported by epigraphic material recording the names and offices of prominent individuals,¹¹⁸ and gentilicial names over several centuries and into the third century CE.¹¹⁹ The above data depict Larinum as a growing centre with established connections and relationships with surrounding groups, similar to Monte Pallano. This illustrates not only aspects of connectivity between Larinum and surrounding groups, but also homogenous cultural traits in the area, contradicting assertions of the isolation and hostility of Iron Age Samnite groups.

Archaeologists have argued that processes of romanisation began in the fourth century BCE in areas surrounding Larinum,¹²⁰ supposedly also marking a level of self-awareness and autonomy in Larinum linked to external pressures (Livy 9.45.1–4; Diodorus Siculus 20.101.5).¹²¹ Livy’s discussion of the territory of Larinum, the *ager Larinas* (27.43.10), rather

¹¹² *ibid.*, 80–82.

¹¹³ Calìo *et al.* 2011, 79; De Felice 1994, 26–28; 40–41; Salmon 1967, 41; Stelluti 1997, 41–42; Isayev 2017, *passim*.

¹¹⁴ Polybius 3.101; Cicero *Pro Cluentio passim*; Nepos *Atticus* 4.12; 7.12.2, 7.13; Caesar *Bellum Civile* 1.23; Livy 22.18, 22.24; 22.43, 27.40, 27.43, 45.2; Silius Italicus 8.399–403, 12.170–175, 15.565–571; Pliny (the Elder) *Naturalis historia* 3.11, 3.105; Silius Italicus 8.399–403, 12.170–175, 15.565–571; Stephanus Byzantius 413, l. 16–17; Appian *Bella Civilia* 1.52; Ptolemaeus *Geography* 3.1.65.

¹¹⁵ Calìo *et al.* 2011, 80–84.

¹¹⁶ Calìo *et al.* 2011, 80–84.

¹¹⁷ Calìo *et al.* 2011, 83.

¹¹⁸ Over 270 inscriptions from Larinum were published in Stelluti 1997.

¹¹⁹ Robinson 2021, 134–201.

¹²⁰ Robinson 2021; Di Niro 1984, 37–38; De Felice 1994, 27–28.

¹²¹ Calìo *et al.* (2011: 84) asserted that pressures on Samnite territory, such as the construction of the *Via Appia* in 312, the ‘colonisation’ of Luceria (c. 315–314), and the treaty (*foedus*) between Rome and the Marsi, Paeligni, Marrucini, and Frentani in 304 ‘provided models for the organisation of the territory and for complex

than the groups of Frentani, Marrucini, and Pretutiani is used as evidence of the region's consolidation.¹²² Biferno Valley Survey and *Forma Italiae* researchers have identified rural sites in the landscape around Larinum containing farmsteads or villas in order to demonstrate changes in population density following the 'Roman occupation'.¹²³ This view has since been adjusted as further 'isolated farms' have been uncovered in the area that fit within the settlement pattern.¹²⁴ Barker's reliance on the city's earlier development patterns and anecdotal evidence from Cicero encourage further scrutiny of the hypothesis for sudden Roman annexation, which is not supported by the material evidence.¹²⁵ Hillside settlements make up the bulk of domestic sites in the Biferno valley, where there is arable upland soil.¹²⁶ Analysis of animal bones and vegetation suggest both agricultural and pastoral activity in the area beginning in the third and second centuries.¹²⁷ This evidence further counters the stereotype of the undeveloped, isolated Samnites, incapable of possessing their own means of production, and therefore only descending from their hill-forts to raid and pillage.

Larinum has been described as 'semi-Samnite' due to its size and evidence for extensive production in the town.¹²⁸ It has been deemed 'too sophisticated' for an 'authentic' rural Samnite settlement, as it does not fit the trope perpetuated by the ancient sources. Scholars have therefore dismissed Samnite-driven development of Larinum in favour of Roman interference in the region. The archaeology of Larinum offers an interconnected and fluid model of the Samnite community, a far cry from the isolated hillfort barbarians portrayed by the scholarship. Indeed, Larinum shows substantial production and manufacturing infrastructure. The lower valley provides ideal conditions for pastoralism and there is evidence of prevalent wool production in nearby Apulia. It is likely that the farm areas surrounding Larinum participated in similar production and trade; discoveries of *fullonicae* (fulling workshops) indicate a market for textile manufacturing.¹²⁹ The artisan quarter at Larinum revealed local stone sculpture from multiple working sites, evidence for ironworking, and ceramics workshops.¹³⁰ Furthermore, Larinum began to issue coins in the third century and there is evidence of an established mint at Larinum by c. 100 BCE.¹³¹ Thus,

urban structures that responded to strong economic and socio-political forces. Henceforth, Larinum saw a new phase of growth and became more heavily involved in the central and southern regions as they were being newly organised by Rome'.

¹²² Di Niro 1984, 37–38; Calì et al. 2011, 84.

¹²³ Barker 1995a; 1995b; Barker, Lloyd and Webley 1978; De Felice 1994. Both the Biferno Valley Survey and the *Forma Italiae* studies concluded that there were sudden changes in the first centuries BCE and CE as the Romans gained increasing power and influence in the region. Cf. Robinson (2021: 21) who has argued for a more gradual development in the region over several centuries; Robinson's work presumes that Roman imperialism was a key factor for change and development in the region.

¹²⁴ Di Niro 1991b; 1993; Lloyd 1991; Patterson 1985; 1987; Barker 1995a, 192–194.

¹²⁵ Barker 1995a, 197–199. This is heavily refuted by Robinson (2021: 49–52).

¹²⁶ Barker 1995a, 29.

¹²⁷ Barker, Lloyd and Webley 1978, 44–45; Dench 1995, 123–125. Grain was the main crop in the Biferno valley, and Larinum exhibits high production of crops from an earlier period. Ceramic goods discovered at the necropolis point to evidence of trade with Magna Graecia, Di Niro 1984, 37–38; Calì et al. 2011, 84.

¹²⁸ Barker 1995a, 209.

¹²⁹ Coarelli 1996; Roselaar 2017, 181; Isayev 2007, 73–76. Loom weights are a common find in the lower Biferno valley, Bispham 2007, 207; Stelluti 1988, fig. 234; De Benedittis 1988; Barker 1995b.

¹³⁰ Barker 1995a, 206; D'Agostino 1980; Di Niro 1991a, 69. Workshops for painted wares and imitation Gnathian vessels suggest that Larinum's inhabitants were utilising relative economies of identity.

¹³¹ Barker 1995a, 197; Robinson 2021, 288–293

the material evidence reflects vibrant systems of production and trade in the region independent of Roman imperial activity. The presence of this infrastructure for production and trade—clustered rural sites surrounding Larinum—as well as the mint at the site indicate that Larinum was connected to substantial trade networks and later participated in a monetised system.

Several observations can be made from this. First, the agency of Samnites at Larinum has been overshadowed by predeterminant assumptions regarding the inevitability of Roman colonisation, evidenced by the consolidation of the city in response to an inevitable (presumed) Roman threat. Second, the archaeological evidence has been—until recently—dismissed in favour of the uncritical adoption of literary narratives produced at least three centuries *post factum* (Livy 9.45.1–4; Diodorus Siculus 20.101.5; Cicero *Pro Cluentio*). Third, notions of Roman-driven advancement presuppose clear divisions and differentiations between the Samnites, Apulians, and Daunians, and the Romans, who later allegedly became the dominant authority in the area and ‘newly organised’ and ‘urbanised’ the region. Fourth, modern understandings of urbanism here imply that Larinum and the Samnites became more sophisticated only after Roman intervention. Finally, as has been discussed at length above, scholars have defined Samnite presence and identity in Larinum *in relation* to other societies. The developments of the fifth century BCE are attributed to responses to Daunian and Apulian influences, and the later consolidation of Larinum is connected to Carthaginian invasion and Roman pressures. The material evidence therefore raises several questions regarding the treatment of Samnites in the secondary literature. Samnite agency has been erased from the historical narrative in favour of a romanocentric representation based on hierarchical systems and external influence. A more mindful reassessment of the evidence reveals Larinum to be an independent hub of production and activity. Furthermore, the degree of interaction between the Frentani, Apulians, and Daunians suggests that Larinum was at the intersection of layered identities and relationships. If the predeterminant assumption of inevitable Roman domination is removed, we can recognise Larinum as an active and connected hub that thrived from the Iron Age through the fourth century BCE, and well into the period of the Social War.

v. Samnium: Connectivity, Identity, and Autonomy

The investigation into the Samnites has thus far demonstrated that the historical construction of Samnite identity is largely dependent on reductive colonial paradigms. While the archaeology of Samnium tells a different story, the conclusions drawn in the scholarship often fall into these same frameworks that privilege proximity to modern Whiteness and the west. In the case of Larinum, we can see that the site is commonly upheld as an exception to typical patterns of Samnite settlement due to the sophisticated industry and exchange visible from the archaeology of the area. However, this level of connectivity (which is antithetical to the isolationist Samnite trope) was likely common throughout wider Samnium during the fifth to third centuries. Transhumance from Monte Pallano and the presence of Samnite mercenaries throughout Italy and Greece suggest that there was more movement in and out of Samnium than scholars have traditionally acknowledged.¹³²

¹³² Discussion of Samnite mercenaries falls outwith the scope of this paper. For more on the presence of Samnites mercenaries in the sources see Thucydides 6.2; Diodorus Siculus 11.1.5, 13.80, 13.80.2, 13.95, 14.8–9; Herodotus 7.165; Arrian *Anabasis* 7.15.4; Polybius 1.7–8; and Griffith (1935) 195 and Tagliamonte 1994. On

We have further clues to Samnite networks, movement, and societal organisation in inscriptions that record civil involvement, magistracies, construction of roads and monuments, and legal texts. The Tablet of Agnone, found close to Pietrabbondante and dated to the third or second century BCE, contains Oscan inscriptions that detail the regulations of a sanctuary. The bronze tablet records the cults of various deities and details of worship, control of the grove site (*Imagines Italicae Terventum* 34),¹³³ and financial information indicating that the site was administered and access to the precinct formally regulated. The sanctuary was dedicated to the pan-Italic agricultural goddess Kerres (*Ceres*) and several other cult deities, including Jupiter and Herakles (but not Mars),¹³⁴ reinforcing the intersectional identity of the Samnites as agriculturalists and pastoralists (Livy 9.13.7; Horace *Odes* 3.6) beyond the modern and artificially imposed limited warrior ethos.¹³⁵ The worship of pan-Italic deities counters the narrative of Samnite isolation; the epithet, *kerrío-* (belonging to Ceres) is used as a qualifier for the named deities which Bradley and Glinister (2014) suggest reinforces the deference of these deities to the goddess.¹³⁶ I would venture further in positing that, in using this qualifier, the Samnites focalised their local, chthonic deity that was intimately connected to their land and therefore defined the terms of ‘outside’ engagement with their cult space. The preference of some Samnite communities to elaborately decorate sanctuaries over sites with other functions reflects a targeted investment into these community spaces that served as meeting points and required socio-political navigation. The tablet also catalogues fifteen ceremonies that occurred within a single year, giving us insight into the Samnite liturgical calendar and the frequency of cult practice. It is reasonable to infer that sharing the use of the grove amongst Samnite groups would have required leadership, negotiation between communities, and commonalities in religious practice, thereby suggesting the existence of complex Samnite civic structures that facilitated this intentional curation of community space.

Artificial binaries and labels applied to Italy in this period obscure the considerable interconnection and movement amongst ancient peoples. For example, La Regina’s *pagus-vicus* paradigm argued that Samnite society (from the fifth century BCE) was organised by dispersed settlement patterns of tribal territories (*pagi*) and small scattered villages (*vici*).¹³⁷ This dispersal of settlement resulted in multiple, intersecting functions at Samnite sites resulting in a lack of urban concentration.¹³⁸ Pietrabbondante was suggested to be one such site for this, where the sanctuary site was therefore also used for civic functions. Contrary to the dominant depiction of the Samnites as a disorganised group,¹³⁹ close reading of the

Italian mercenaries, see contributions by Armstrong and Tagliamonte in Armstrong, Naco del Hoyo, and Rawlings (2027).

¹³³ Oscan: *húrtín kerríín* (in the grove of [the personified] Kerres), *az húrtúm* (at the grove), and *aasas ekask eestínt húrtúí* (these altars stand in the grove), *Imagines Italicae Terventum* 34. See Buck 1904; Crawford *et al.* 2011, 1200–1205; Scopacasa 2014, 78; Meiser 2017, 748; Vine 2017, 755; Baldi 2017, 805 & 808.

¹³⁴ Maras 2017, 68–69; Di Fazio 2017, 151–157; Bradley & Glinister 2014, 181; Scopacasa 2014, 78–80.

¹³⁵ Reinforced by the discovery of votive statuettes of sheep and cattle at nearby Petacciato, Scopacasa 2014, 80.

¹³⁶ Bradley and Glinister 2014, 181.

¹³⁷ Set in opposition to the Greek *polis*, and lacking centralisation in comparison.

¹³⁸ And therefore habitation, administration, cult, trade, and defence were spread throughout the *pagus*. La Regina 1970; 1980, 36–42; Tagliamonte 1996, 156–202; Scopacasa 2015, 160–161. It is important to also consider the interplay between Samnite settlement patterns and the mountainous geography of the region that necessitated this, see Dench 1995, ch. 3.

¹³⁹ Mommsen, 1862, 123–124; Salmon 1967; Dench 1995, 8.

literary sources suggests strong military organisation and leadership from Samnite leaders (i.e. Livy 8.2–8.5 & 9.1.3). For example, architectural and inscriptional evidence, such as that at the theatre-temple complex at Pietrabbondante, indicates the existence of meeting-places where different (plausibly ‘Samnite’) groups came together and discussed military issues.¹⁴⁰

There is general acceptance that the Samnites and other central and southern Italian groups, like the Romans, had some form of elites. Specifically, Samnite identity has been intimately connected to the presence of military elites within their community, in line with their characterisation as *montani atque agrestes*.¹⁴¹ Livy (9.1.3; 10.20.13; *Epitomae* 75; *Periochae* 11) mentions several Samnite groups, each with numerous leaders or generals, and that this lack of centralised leadership contributed to Roman difficulties in negotiating with the Samnites. However, an inscription at Pietrabbondante complicates this picture, indicating that public magistrates held responsibilities outside of the military sphere. This is evidenced by a public monument at Pietrabbondante (mid-second century), which sheds light on patronage and the funding of community infrastructure: ‘Stenis [---] public magistrate gave [this monument] to be built and approved (it)’.¹⁴² The *pagus-vicus* paradigm has since been refuted by scholars arguing against the use of static dichotomies to classify ancient communities.¹⁴³ ‘Urban’ or ‘city-state’ and ‘non-urban’ classifications reduce complex societies and identities to simplified polarities,¹⁴⁴ reflecting the tendency to categorise and define within the ‘western frameworks’ defined in part i.

While archaeology has long been presented, particularly within positivist and classical traditions, as an objective, empirical discipline capable of producing stable, factual knowledge in contrast to the interpretive nature of historical narrative, most contemporary archaeological scholarship recognises the field as inherently interpretive and theory-laden.¹⁴⁵ Archaeology alone is not therefore capable of resolving the methodological and epistemological problems posed by the literary record. Indeed, it does not solve methodological problems of scholarship such as the indiscriminate application of identity labels and the arbitrary definition of geographical boundaries. Cemeteries are not wholesale indicators of continuous occupation or settlement; not all burial practices leave a permanent record, and the quality or concentration of buried goods may not accurately demonstrate the material wealth of deceased individuals or their families.¹⁴⁶ The assumption that rich burials reflect the presence of an elite presupposes that ancient Italians had the resources available to deposit the grave goods and that the burial of material goods was a

¹⁴⁰ La Regina 1976; 1980; Scopacasa 2015, 163.

¹⁴¹ The textual evidence is further supported by rich deposits of grave goods uncovered in burials throughout central Italian sites. Bell *et al.* 2002, 180; Calì *et al.* 2011, 80–82; Fulminante 2014; Scopacasa 2015, 270–275; 2016; Stoddart *et al.* 2020, 7–8, 15; Terrenato 2019, 134. Terrenato’s discussion of elite networks includes little mention of the Samnites, despite the Livian evidence and their important role in Rome’s emerging empire. There is general consensus among scholars that ‘elite’ represents a fluid category rather than a closed, rigid, or unchangeable class. Hölkeskamp 2004; Bradley 2015.

¹⁴² Maras 2017, 70.

¹⁴³ Bradley 2000, 58–62; Isayev 2017, 55–8.

¹⁴⁴ Scopacasa 2015, 163.

¹⁴⁵ e.g. Cipolla, Crellin, and Harris 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Isayev (2007: 8) points out that status may not always be represented by material objects: for example, access to cremation may distinguish an elite individual in the material record. Additionally, it is important to consider cremation or the choice not to deposit material objects in the burial.

performance of wealth.¹⁴⁷ This theory assumes that the ‘non-elite’ had no resources outside of use for subsistence. This model is rooted in understandings of modern capitalist systems where ‘elites’ accumulate wealth through the control of resources and extraction of labour.¹⁴⁸ It is therefore often presumed, implicitly, that central and southern Italian economies operated through similar systems of production, profit, and centralisation of power. Archaeology requires a historical framework to contextualise sites and artefacts into an accessible regional context; without intentional correction, this framework is oftentimes self-fulfilling, built on the bias of the ancient sources as well as colonialist interpretations of them.

The political complexity and organisation of the Samnites discussed in the ancient sources, together with the material evidence of production, trade, and evident community spaces, all suggest a society that had resilient and extensive connections with other groups throughout the Mediterranean.¹⁴⁹ This is also one of the ways that connectivity counters hegemony—that it allows communities and peoples outside the hegemonic powers agency through increased networks of relationships and access to resources, and therefore avails alternative recourses during times of change.¹⁵⁰ The Samnites, therefore, operated within many overlapping spheres of identity and thus, the arbitrary labels that have been applied to them by ancient annalists and modern scholars alike must be re-evaluated—especially since these labels seem to be deployed in the scholarship ethnographically, culturally, linguistically, and geographically.

Conclusion

The systemic issues ingrained in the discipline of classics and ancient history have consequences that reach beyond issues of diversity and access. The issues of colonialism, elitism, exclusion, and race have a cyclical impact on the interpretations of the ancient evidence, impacting how it is read, perceived, and how subsequent histories are written by scholars. Although it is difficult to mitigate natural biases, it is important to actively challenge dichotomies that are reflective of ‘western foundations’. This paper has therefore proposed a reconsideration of how we characterise the Samnites, a central and south Italian community who have been stripped of its agency, reduced to existing in juxtaposition with Roman excellence. Roman imperialist expansion is not only a theory presented by modern scholars, but it also appears as a driving force in the ancient literature; Samnite identity has therefore been lost to historians outside of the Samnite relationship with Rome, and particularly in a post-Social War context. Colonial frameworks and research scaffolds therefore continue to prejudice how modern scholars fit Samnites into the historical

¹⁴⁷ Isayev 2007, 11. This also means that resources were either used to obtain grave goods, or that these goods were removed from circulation (use or exchange).

¹⁴⁸ Hodos 2006, 5–9.

¹⁴⁹ Livy bks 7–10; Bispham (2007: 192) suggests that the diffusion of cuirasses throughout Abruzzo and Molise reflects a growing awareness of a ‘Samnite ethnic-cultural’ identity and a hierarchical society of young warriors in the Oscan populations as early as the sixth century.

¹⁵⁰ Roman expansion severed local alliances and networks, pressuring parties into unilateral treaties directly with Rome and forcing diplomatic ties through Rome’s mediation, it also increased centralisation of a dispersed or decentralised network. I gratefully credit Jack Barlow for his insight on this point, which aligns well with anti-colonial positions, see García Peña 2022; Tuhiwai Smith 2012. Angela Davis’ (2016) *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* is useful reading on the innate connectivity of anti-imperial movements.

narrative.¹⁵¹ In encouraging a re-evaluation of the modern scholarship, I have demonstrated that modern historians have often used the ancient sources to justify a preoccupation with Roman hegemony at the expense of Othered groups.

The discussion of ancient literary and material evidence above has shown the precarity of current constructions of Samnite identity. Simplistic presentations of the Other can be adjusted with new considerations of the evidence. Shifting the centre away from empire—by inviting new approaches outside of colonial paradigms—presents alternative avenues for considering Samnite communities. In doing so, we find that Samnium is not isolated but interconnected, and had comprehensive infrastructure related to trade, industry, religion and civic activity. This autonomy and resilience through connectivity refutes a theory of unilateral dependency on Roman apparatuses. Samnite life was also entrenched in the relationship to the land through chthonic cult, pastoral and agricultural activity, and seasonal migration. When considered in this light, we can see a new beginning for Samnite identity. A key step in dismantling these structures of 'the west and the Rest', and rectifying the impact they have had on research output, is to allow space for more diverse voices and perspectives to join the scholarly conversation and help expand our models.

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¹⁵¹ Indeed, Lomas and Herring's book, *The Emergence of State Identities in Italy in the First Millennium BC* (2000), begins and ends with 'romanisation'.

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