

# Wells of Wonders: New Discoveries at Cetamura del Chianti

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*II.1.4.2. Astragali (cat. no. 23)*

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An *astragalus* (*talus* in Latin) is a bone in the ankle or hock (commonly, but incorrectly, called "knucklebone") that was widely used in the ancient world for games of chance and ritual offerings (Elia and Caré 2004; Gilmour 1997). Prior to the excavations in Well # 1 at Cetamura (2012–2014), only scattered cow, pig, and sheep/goat astragali had been reported on the site, mostly from ritual contexts. Well #1 contained a surprising total of 168 astragali from sheep/goat, pig and boar, cow, and deer, almost all of which came from separate individuals, i.e., only one astragalus per animal ( see II.1.4.2 Fig. 1, for examples). The highest concentrations were found in the Etruscan levels of the well, with the greatest numbers from sheep/goat (see the faunal report by O. Fonzo and C. Corbino, Section III.6, below). Though few show signs of significant modification or polishing, many are slightly flattened on the lateral sides and most show signs of wear on the contact surfaces. Most are also thermo-altered; this is probably due to boiling of the bones to remove the flesh, which also darkens the bone's surface. Even though most of these astragali are not modified like those from many Greek and Near Eastern sites, the absence of a sufficient quantity of bones related to the individual astragali argues for their use in divination and against their status as food debris. The astragali may have been thrown into the well as an offering after each consultation, as hypothesized for divinatory tokens ( Section II.1.4.3) or may have been redeposited or dumped from another part of the site where the divination was practiced, since a deep well would not permit a visible landing of the thrown astragali for interpretation. This is the first evidence for astragalomancy from the Chianti region, and perhaps the first from northern Etruria.



Fig. 1. Astragali. From l. to r., roe deer, red deer, sheep/goat and pig

### 23. Astragali (domesticated and wild pig, sheep/goat, deer)

Pig. Prov. 5N/18W.109. L. 3.4. W. 1.8. Wt. 7.68 g. The lowest in depth in Well # 1, light grayish tan, matte, not polished. One small cut mark and grinding/slicing on contact surfaces. *Dating:* Found in Well Group I (300–200 BCE).

Pig. Prov. 5N/18W.106. L. 3.3. W. 1.7. Wt. 8.89 g. Medium brown, highly polished. Modified by smoothing on lateral and medial sides, contact surfaces show signs of wear. *Dating:* Found in Well Group II (ca. 200–150 BCE).

Boar. Prov. 5N/18W.105. L. 4.8. W. 3.1. Wt. 22.06 g. Very dark brown, polished. Small area sliced smooth (perhaps from butchering), but with few signs of wear. Broken on one side, but this does not prevent landing on that side when thrown, though it makes it wobbly. This is the only wild boar *astragalus* from the well. *Dating:* Found in Well Group II (ca. 200–150 BCE).

Lamb/kid. Prov. 5N/18W.105. L. 2.5. W. 1.3. Wt. 1.59 g. The smallest *astragalus* from the well. Matte brown in color, not polished; surface has some interior bone exposed, perhaps from butchering. *Dating:* Found in Well Group II (ca. 200–150 BCE).

Sheep/goat. Prov. 5N/18W.104. L. 3. W. 2. Wt. 5.89 g. Reddish brown. Polished and smoothed except on one side, which has numerous cut marks. Wobbly when thrown. *Dating:* Found in Well Group III (ca. 150–100 BCE).

Pig. Prov. 5N/18W.103. L. 2.4. W. 2. Wt. 9.7 g. Horizontally bisected. Grayish brown in color, various small cut marks visible. The bisection could have been the result of butchering but all sides are smoothed, which suggests deliberate modification. Ritual bisecting is also hypothesized for tokens and ring-foot-base cups. Cf. cat. nos. 32, 33, 54–56. *Dating:* Found in Well Group III (ca. 150–100 BCE).

Roe deer. Prov. 5N/18W.101. L. 2.9. W. 2. Wt. 8.34 g. Brown, polished, with smoothing and wear. This is one of four *astragali* from four different roe deer in the Etruscan levels of the well. Roe deer *astragali* are rare in ancient Mediterranean archaeological contexts. *Dating:* Found in Well Group III (ca. 150–100 BCE).

Sheep/goat. Prov. 5N/18W.99. L. 2.7. W. 1.5. Wt. 5.19 g. Modified slightly on the lateral and medial sides: surfaces leveled and smoothed. Brown in color and polished, with areas of the interior bone exposed on the surfaces that would touch the ground when thrown. *Dating:* Found in Well Group IV (ca. 100–50 BCE).

Sheep/goat. Prov. 5N/18W.98. L. 3.3. W. 1.8. Wt. 5.36 g. Calcined from prolonged exposure to high heat, the only matte white *astragalus* from the well. Most of the bottom half of the bone is eroded, a few areas are blackened with soot. *Dating:* Found in Well Group IV (ca. 100–50 BCE).

Red deer. Prov. 5N/18W.96. L. 5.4. W. 3.3. Wt. 47.89 g. Brown to greenish brown, highly polished. Some smoothing on the lateral and medial sides, but no signs of wear on the contact surfaces of the dorsal and plantar sides. This is one of only two red deer *astragali* in the well (the other, very similar in size and appearance to this one, is from Roman locus 92). *Dating:* Found in Well Group IV (ca. 100–50 BCE).

Probably sheep/goat. Inv. C-93-141 and C-93-154. Prov. 24N/15W.4. large: L. 3.7. W. 2.1 Th. 0.9; small: L. 2.8 W. 1.5 Th. 1.4. Worked *astragali*, smoothed to land on one of the two flat surfaces if thrown. *Dating:* Found on Zone I in the area of the baths, in a context of uncertain dating. *Bibl. Cetamura Antica* 2000, 41–42 (cat. nos. 167–68).

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