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ETRUSCAN NECROPOLISES OF CERVETERI AND TARQUINIA

“We paused to gaze across the view before our eyes – the place where the ancient capital of Etruria once stood. We looked for traces of buildings but could discern nothing more than the rocks that served as their foundations, nor was there any sign of masonry. Standing on the threshold of the cities of the dead, we tried vainly to discover what had once been the city of the living.”

Il viaggiatore immaginario. L'Italia degli itinerari perduti, Attilio Brilli

Like all Etruscan sites, Tarquinia and Cerveteri display few remains of their wooden and terracotta temples, and even fewer of the “cities of the living”, obliterated by the stratification of new dwellings for new peoples built on top of each other over the millennia. Instead, it is their “cities of the dead” that have been preserved – monumental necropolises positioned at the city gates or on opposite hillsides, with large burials dug into the soft tufa rock covered with *tumuli*, whose diameters were proportional to the wealth of the family members resting beneath. Paradoxically, the cemeteries reveal the vital energy and great attachment to life of the Etruscans. The fine frescoes on their tombs tell us about their obsession for hunting, in fact they organised hunting parties followed by sumptuous banquets under colourful tents amidst delicious food served by young slaves, dancers, games and brutal fights; their passion for dancing to the sound of double flutes and stringed instruments; and their idea of free and shameless love, so distant from the constraints of Catholic morality. These frescoes have outlived the centuries, and today are preserved *in situ*, sealed in climatically protected environments for us to enjoy and marvel at.



SERIAL CULTURAL HERITAGE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 1158
CITY OF INSCRIPTION: SUZHOU, CHINA
YEAR OF INSCRIPTION: 2004

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The two necropolises constitute a unique testimony to the ancient Etruscan civilisation. The descriptions of daily life depicted on the tombs' frescoes bear witness to this culture.





“We went inside the most important tomb, the one that belonged to the noble Matuta family: a low underground hall with twenty funeral beds [...] and decorated with closely packed polychrome plaster casts of the beloved, trusted objects of everyday life; stoppers, ropes, hatchets, shears, spades, knives, bows, arrows, even hunting dogs and marsh birds.”

The first pages of *The garden of the Finzi-Continis* by Giorgio Bassani recount a Sunday outing in 1957. While visiting the Cerveteri necropolis with a group of friends, the narrator is struck by the *Tomba dei Rilievi*, which reminds him of a monumental tomb in the Jewish Cemetery in Ferrara – the tomb of the Finzi-Continis, a wealthy family marked by a tragic fate and dispersed in Nazi concentration camps.

This itinerary starts in **1 Santa Marinella**; far from Cerveteri and Tarquinia. It is where the novel begins and also where it was first written. Santa Marinella is a pleasant seaside resort with surf-friendly beaches and the impressive, monumental **2 Santa Severa Castle** by the sea. An *antiquarium* in the castle houses materials from the excavation of the sacred area of Pyrgi, including a copy of the three famous gold plates bearing inscriptions in Etruscan and Punic languages. The necropolises of Tarquinia and Cerveteri are located respectively 30 km north and 10 km

south of the Santa Severa Castle. Attilio Brilli beautifully describes **3 Tarquinia** in his work *Il viaggiatore immaginario. L'Italia degli itinerari perduti*: “It opens up to the traveller as a fairly intact example of a medieval city [...]. The city walls, the homogeneity of the urban fabric [...], the recurring arches between buildings, the shady network of streets [...], the luminous openings of the views [...] make Tarquinia a city of changing and intense charm”. In the fascinating **National Archaeological Museum of Tarquinia**, the story of the Etruscans in town is impeccably told through astonishing

exhibits. “The necropolis of Tarquinia is unique for its frescoes. But perhaps on the whole, the necropolis of Cerveteri exudes an even greater fascination. [...] A path winds its way across the Maremma-like landscape [...] between high tufa walls, while narrower paths open out to the sides, in the shadow of the rocks; and tufa is dotted with tomb entrances, half-covered by splendid vegetation. In the middle rises an oak tree.” As Guido Piovene in *Viaggio in Italia*, you, too, can appreciate the very special charm of the **4 Banditaccia Necropolis**, a fairy village immersed in the shade of oak woods.



STILLNESS AND ENERGY

“There is a stillness and a softness in these great grassy mounds [...] True, it was a still and sunny afternoon in April [...] But there was a stillness and soothingness in all the air, in that sunken place, and a feeling that it was good for one’s soul to be there.”

“Lovely again is the Tomba delle Leonesse, the Tomb of the Lionesses. In its gable two spotted lionesses swing their bell-like udders, heraldically facing one another across the altar [...]. Under, [...] the dolphins are leaping [...] into the rippling sea, while birds fly between the fishes.”

Etruscan Places, D.H. Lawrence

As diverse as they may look, the necropolises of Cerveteri and Tarquinia are a rare testimony to the Etruscans, a people who reached such a level of power at a remote time in our history that they could only be halted by an equally powerful people – the Romans. The Necropolis near Cerveteri, known as Banditaccia, consists of a series of burial mounds of various sizes, crossed by roads carved in tufa, named “*tagliate*”. According to D. H. Lawrence, this surreal landscape inspires a sense of peacefulness far removed from oppressive thoughts of death. The same is true for Monterozzi necropolis in Tarquinia, whose frescoes convey feelings of joy and vitality as they vividly express Etruscan vital energy, in clear contrast to their function as a place of eternal rest.



"ONE GLANCE WAS ENOUGH FOR MARTIA TO KNOW THAT SHE WOULD NOT BE WEARING THE CHITON, THE SHORT-SLEEVED GREEK TUNIC WITH THE BLACK AND RED-EDGED CLOAK. INSTEAD, SHE WOULD BE WEARING THE PINK-ORANGE SKIRT EMBROIDERED WITH DISCS IN LONG BANDS, ALONG WITH THE HEAVY RED VELVET CORSET WITH ORIENTAL SLEEVES THAT WIDENED HER SHOULDERS

AND THINNED HER WAIST [...]. NOW, AS MARTIA TOOK A FINAL LOOK IN THE MIRROR, THE PERFECTLY POLISHED METAL DISC REFLECTED A GRACEFUL FACE AND AN INTENSE GAZE."

This passage from Teresa Buongiorno's *Ragazzo etrusco* (Etruscan Boy) recaptures a moment in the life of ancient Etruscans. Sadly, not much remains of this very powerful people, the Tarquins, who provided Rome with two kings and came close to prevailing over it. Our knowledge of their

civilisation is founded almost entirely on the study of their necropolises, the best known of which are Banditaccia in Cerveteri and Monterozzi in Tarquinia. Starting your journey in **1 Cerveteri**, you will soon realise how unparalleled it is to wander freely around the necropolis road carved into the tufa rock, winding between huge oak trees and tumuli covered by vegetation. The necropolis is a faithful reproduction of Etruscan cities, both in the burial layout and its interiors, which reflect their typical architecture. Follow the signs to spot the finest tombs featuring columns, beds where the dead were laid, and then seats, lintels and sloping roofs. The most outstanding burial place in Cerveteri is undoubtedly the **Tomba dei Rilievi**, belonging to the Matuna family. The stucco-decorated walls depict all the everyday items available to a powerful Ceretan family. Next, move on to the **2 Museo Nazionale Archeologico Cerite** to appreciate the exhibits found in the tombs, most notably the **Euphronius Krater**, a half-a-meter-diameter vase depicting Sarpedon, a Trojan prince, being brought back to his homeland by the winged figures of Sleep and Death. Proceed now to the painted tombs of **3 Tarquinia**, where notable mentions go, to Tomba degli **Àuguri**, dei **Leopardi**, delle **Leonesse**, dei **Giocolieri**, dei **Tori** and the **Tomba della Caccia e della Pesca** just to name a few. After visiting Monterozzi Necropolis, indulge in a promenade through the delightful **4 centre of Tarquinia** to fill your eyes with towers, palaces, and squares full of cozy restaurants. Do not miss the valuable objects you can learn about through didactic activities in the **5 National Archaeological Museum**, housed in a 15th-century palace.



CERVETERI AND TARQUINIA in books

Reading suggestions to discover
Banditaccia and Monterozzi necropolises.

• **Etruscan Places**, D.H. Lawrence (1932). David Herbert Lawrence, author of the well-known novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), wrote *Etruscan Places* during one of his extended stays in Italy. Published posthumously, the book describes the Etruscan archaeological sites as they appeared in the early 20th century, providing a foreigner's perspective on Mussolini's Italy.

• **Viaggio in Italia**, Guido Piovene (1957). To craft this unique and magnificently detailed reportage, Piovene travelled for three years throughout the Bel Paese. This work is considered a classic of Italian travel literature. From the Alps to Sicily, including Cerveteri and Tarquinia, the

author's gaze invites the readers to discover our wonders.

• **The Garden of the Finzi-Continis**, Giorgio Bassani (1962). The novel opens with a trip to Cerveteri. The great *Tomba dei Rilievi* in Banditaccia brings to the narrator's mind the vicissitudes of the Finzi-Contini family from Ferrara. The garden of the large family home becomes a place of refuge for the young protagonists, a sort of microcosm protected from the outside world and the racial laws that would ultimately overwhelm the family's destiny. Themes such as friendship, love, loss, and isolation are tackled, offering a profound, touching glimpse into the lives of Italian Jews during the turbulent period that culminated in the Second World War.

• **Il viaggiatore immaginario. L'Italia degli itinerari perduti**, Attilio Brilli (1997). Brilli was a professor of Anglo-American literature at the University of

Arezzo. During his career, he focused on Anglophone travel literature, particularly on the myth of the Grand Tour. In 1997, inspired by the Grand Tourists, he retraced the evocative itineraries detailed in this book, concentrating on central Italy.

• **Andare per l'Italia etrusca**, Valerio Massimo Manfredi (2016). In this work, the renowned historical novelist embarks on a journey through the fascinating Etruscan civilization. With his usual narrative mastery, Manfredi transports the reader into a mysterious and intriguing era, revealing the intricate details of Etruscan daily life, religion, art, and politics.

Children's books:

• **Ragazzo etrusco**, Teresa Buongiorno (2014). The novel is set in Veio, an Etruscan town conquered by the Romans in 396 B.C. after a 10-year siege.