

A CITY ETRUSCAN STYLE

“Soon we came to Tarquinia, with its towers standing out like aerials, on the slopes of a low rugged hill, about five miles from the coast... They make a strange impression, these slim, tall towers - blind and with no expression, thrusting into the sky. From a distance they resemble the factory chimneys of a modern city.” This is how novelist D. H. Lawrence described the town of Tarquinia when he visited some of the famous archeological sites in ancient Etruria during his tour of Italy in 1927

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efore him - way back in 1842 - another literary figure, George Dennis, had also described Tarquinia and its *“almost intact medieval district... with its churches, castle and more than twenty towers standing out against the sky. As for the rest, there's not much else to see...”*

The towers and other medieval features of ancient Corneto - the name dates back to the Middle Ages and was used until 1922 - stand out in the landscape of the *“queen of the Maremma”* - again in the words of George Dennis.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the glorious Etruscan past of this area was the chief attraction for European intellectuals, historians and writers who made sure they visited some of the lesser known archeological sites during their

journeys. Legend has it that the town was founded by Tarconte, son of king Lidio Tirreno. Under the Etruscans, Tarquinia reached the height of its fame, as can be seen from the large number of remains from that period.

The Etruscan inhabitants of Tarquinia used the port of Gravisca for trading especially with the Greeks. The finds from the nearby necropolis of Montarozzi, now in the Palazzo Vitelleschi archeological museum, show the high level of artistic work they achieved.

But the flourishing Etruscan phase came to a sudden end following the Roman occupation in 308 BC. It was only much later, in the 8th century AD, that historical records mention a small village situated on the north-west side of the rocky outcrop overlooking the river Marta, and a church, Santa Maria

ad rupes, which was rebuilt in the early 12th century with the new name of Santa Maria in Castello (1121-1208).

The ancient city was located in the area which is known today as Pian della Civita, where most of the remains of the Etruscan acropolis are still buried. In the Middle Ages, the new town of Corneto - the name derives from a common weed called *“corniolo”* - developed on the area where today we see the many towers, medieval and renaissance buildings, as well as the Romanesque and Gothic churches that give the town its particular charm.

Starting from Santa Maria in Castello, a fine Romanesque church whose facade and floors are decorated in the typical Cosmati style, we find ourselves in front of the first tower, the tallest of all, which probably served as a sort of reference point and landmark for travelers.

The medieval character of Corneto can best be seen in the town's two oldest streets (the Poggio and Valle streets) where dwellings and towers alternate with late-medieval and renaissance buildings. Along the Valle street, we see the late-Gothic *“Palazzetto del Santo Spirito”*, the town's first hospice, which was completed in 1447 and is now used as the municipal archive. Another interesting building is the *“Palazzo dei Priori”* with its four towers, and the nearby church of San Pancrazio (late 12th century).

It is not difficult to imagine what this area must have been like in the 12th



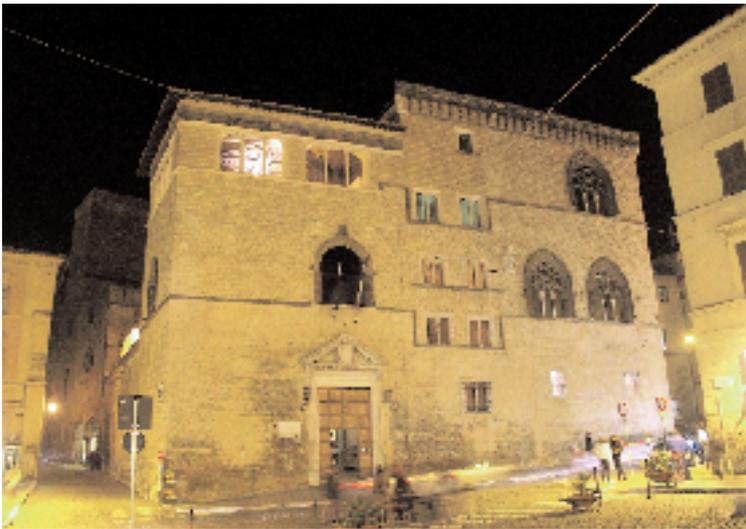
century when it was the center of town life. Today many of the buildings have been carefully restored by the local authorities.

Continuing our walk through the maze of narrow streets, we come to the Palazzo dei Vitelleschi, a late-Gothic and renaissance style building named after one of the most important local families.

One of the members of the family was cardinal Giovanni Vitelleschi. He was a trusty follower of pope Eugene IV and stood by him on several occasions

main events from the past. Especially interesting is a fresco which narrates the town's history, since it provides a view of turreted Corneto as it appeared in the 17th century.

From piazza del Comune, we take another street, known as "borgo nuovo" (new district) which traces the expansion of the town from the 13th century onwards. Here too there are surprises; we see the massive convent of St. Francis (13th century) and the church of St. John the Baptist, previously owned by the Knights of Malta, Order of



when he was threatened by enemies. The palazzo that the cardinal had built in the mid-15th century as a symbol of his prestige, is now used as the National Etruscan Museum with a large collection of finds for the most part made up of funeral trappings from the nearby necropolis of Monterozzi.

From palazzo Vitelleschi, we follow the corso Vittorio Emanuele II, the main road lined with shops and dividing the town into two, to reach piazza Matteotti which is overlooked by two baroque churches (del Suffragio and dell'Addolorata) and the imposing town hall.

The church of the Addolorata was enlarged and altered many times over the centuries, and the facade shows a mixture of styles ranging from the 13th to the 16th centuries. One of the rooms of the town hall contains a cycle of 17th century frescoes depicting some of the

Jerusalem. Together they represent two interesting examples of Romanesque-Gothic architecture.

Apart from the Etruscan Archeological Museum and the Ceramics Museum - housed in Palazzo dei Priori - Tarquinia has a series of local traditions linked mainly to religious festivals. Two important processions are held during the Easter period. On Good Friday, the stations of the cross evoking Christ's Passion are carried by figures dressed in Roman costumes, and on Easter Sunday a second procession represents the Resurrection. Another interesting event is the festival of St. Anthony (January 17) when pets and farm animals are blessed, accompanied by costumed figures on horseback. The town's medieval past is evoked in several other events such as the "Giostra delle Contrade" in April when the town's districts compete against one another, and the



WHAT TO SEE ONCE IN TARQUINIA

- Etruscan necropolis at Monterozzi, tel. 0766 840000, opening times Tue.-Sun., 8:30-14:00
- National Etruscan Museum (Palazzo Vitelleschi), tel. 0766 850080, opening times Tue.-Sun., 8:30-19:00
- Museum of Rural Life, tel. 339 2138953, opening times Sat.-Sun. 16:00-20:00
- Museum of Ceramics (Palazzo dei Priori), opening times Mon.- Fri. 9:00-13:00 and 16:00-18:00 Sat: 9:00-12.30
- Diocesan Museum of Sacred Art (Palazzo Vescovile), opening times Sat.-Sun. 10:00-12:00 and 16:00-19:00.

"Festa della Merca" when farm animals are marked and branded. Then on the feast of Corpus Domini in June, some of the streets are strewn with flowers. So there is no lack of traditional events in Tarquinia all year round. Not to mention the chance to experience the Etruscan past with a visit to the necropolis of Montarozzi, recently included on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites. The dozens of richly decorated tombs and hypogeums provide an extraordinary glimpse into the ancient world with fascinating scenes of hunting, banquets and festivals with musicians ... what better way to celebrate passing into the hereafter. ■

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