

Casentino, Tuscany, The Mystery of our Roots

The ETRUSCAN

We do not know the origin of this population, but there are 2 main hypotheses: autochthonous development of the Villanovian culture or a colonization from Anatolia.

At the moment the 1st idea counts the most of the followers, we can say that a separate Etruscan culture emerged in the beginning of the 8th century BC, had the acme along the 6th century BC, when the mining and commerce of metal, especially copper and iron (mainly found in the Etruscan coast and Elba Island), led to an enrichment of the Etruscans and to the expansion of their influence in the Italian peninsula and the western Mediterranean sea. and that the end of the history is mixed with the history of Rome: 3 of the "7 roman kings" had an etruscan origin Tarquinio Prisco (616–579) Servio Tullio (578–535) Tarquinio il Superbo (535–510/509) BC , and at the beginning of the 1st century BC Rome annexed all the remaining Etruscan territory.

Scientists extracted and typed the hypervariable region of mitochondrial DNA of 14 individuals buried in two Etruscan necropoleis, analyzing them along with other Etruscan and Medieval samples, and 4,910 contemporary individuals from the Mediterranean basin. Comparing ancient (30 Etruscans, 27 Medieval individuals) and modern DNA sequences (370 Tuscans), with the results of millions of computer simulations, So they show that the Etruscans can be considered ancestral, with a high degree of confidence, to the current inhabitants of Casentino and Volterra, but not to the general contemporary population of the former Etruscan homeland.

The mystery surrounding Etruscan culture comes from the fact that we have no documents from them, except artistic masterpieces and burial tombs, Virtually all that we know about Etruscan history today comes to us from indirect sources- either from Roman historians or Greek ones.

Although the Etruscan language is by no means totally decoded, we now know enough to see that many words of Etruscan origin found themselves into Latin . We have no texts no poems from them, texts for sure they produced. Probably the complete destruction of all Etruscan literature was a result of the advent of Christianity. Arnobius, one of the first Christian apologists, living around 300 AC, wrote "Etruria is the originator and mother of all superstition". You can now read only inscriptions, wrote right to left, mainly on burial stones and a few more documents on bronze.

In reason of the lack of documents, we do not know Etruscan religion, but we know they had several gods that starting from the 6th century BC become similar to Greek and Roman ones, for sure they had a holy place in Casentino mountains, the nowadays called Lake of Idols (Lago degli Idoli) is about 1380 metres above sea level on the southern slope of Monte Falterona near to the sources of the Arno. There a lot of votive offerings (Idols they throw into the lake) was collected during last two centuries, the most of them can be found in major international Museums: the British Museum, the Louvre and the Walters Art Gallery of Baltimore.

The Etruscans referred to themselves as Rasenna people, (Going to Arezzo, you find the village of RASSINA and you can easily guess the origin of the name) but to the Romans and Greeks they were Etrusci, Tusci (from that the name Toscana, Tuscany), Tyrrheni (that named the Mar Tirreno, the Tyrrhenian sea), or Tyrseni.

A few Km from Rassina, you can visit Pieve a Socana, a small village with a nice Romanic church. But in the back of the Church, you can discover a quite large stone table... it is a sacrificial altar that has been used between VI and II century BC. Probably they used to

sacrify animals to their gods on there, along a road of commerce and pilgrimage connecting to Lake of Idols and Etruscan lands on the other side of Appennini mountains.

Etruscan had a political structure based on city-state, with centralized power structures maintaining order and constructing public works, such as irrigation networks, roads, and town defenses. They had Kings, It is presumed that Etruscan kings were military and religious leaders. The paraphernalia of Etruscan kingship is familiar because it was inherited at Rome and adopted as symbols of the republican authority

During the golden age of the etruscans, the main towns was: Veio, Cerveteri, Tarquinia, Vulci, Orvieto, Fiesole, Vetulonia, Volterra, Arezzo, Cortona, Chiusi, Perugia.

You can plan to visit Arezzo now or in the trip dedicated to Middle Ages and Piero della Francesca. The Etruscan Arezzo is mainly known for the Chimera, probably produced in Magna Grecia during the end of 5th or beginning of 4th century BC for an Etruscan comittance, is a 65 cm tall bronze fantastic animal, it was discovered in Arezzo in 1553 and is now in Florence, in the National Archeological Museum, close to Piazza S. Marco.

Several pieces of jewellery was found in Arezzo and are now showed in the town museum. And we can imagine that the gold factories that are nowadays a pride of the town may have their roots in the Etruscan art: By the way, if you are interested in gold production you can spend a visit in the UNO A ERRE gold museum and factory shop.

You need to visit Cortona, with the Etruscan Enchantment Exhibition. Along the way 71, between Camucia and Castiglion Fiorentino, you can stop to visit an etruscan sight: The "Melone del Sodo 2" is a "tumulo" type grave 60 meters large and 10 meters high, dating back to 6th century BC. Close to it, a magnificent altar. Opening hours: tuesday to sunday 8.30 am to 1 pm. Free entrance but is better to call 0575 61256 in advance,

Arriving in Cortona, is impressive to know that the city walls are middle ages buildings setting on the roots of the Etruscan ones. You can enjoy a visit to the old village,

Cortona was a large Etruscan city state (Lucumonia) making coin, on the 310 bc. The town was compelled to sign an alliance with Rome, but that was the last unusefull step to the end.

In Cortona was found one of the better conserved etruscan text: the TABULA CORTONENSIS, in bronze, regarding a deed of sale or a commercial arbitrage about a piece of land near the Trasimeno lake. In the surroundings of Cortona was found also the bronze Etruscan hanging lamp Its iconography includes (under the 16 burners) alternating figures of Silenus playing panpipes or double flutes, and of sirens or harpies. Within zones representing waves, dolphins and fiercer sea-creatures is a gorgon-like face with protruding tongue

You can find Tabula and Lamp in the Etruscan museum, that is also guesting (22 March to July 31) several pieces that are back from the British Museum. Visit Etruria Enchantment, in the Palazzo Casali, Piazza Signorelli 9, Cortona, 10 am to 7 pm, Ticket 7 to 12 euro, free ammission under 12 YO. You will find here even a copy of the Chimera.

Typical of the the area was the local production of Bucchero regarded as the "national" pottery of ancient Etruria, this ware is distinguished by its black fabric as well as glossy, black surface achieved through the unique method in which it was fired. In smoke-filled atmosphere of the kiln, the oxygen-starved flames drew oxygen molecules from the iron oxide of the pottery. This process caused the fabric of the clay to change color from its

natural red to black..

Quite famous as a sign of the Etruscan lifestyle, the statues decorating the graves: they give the idea of an opulent life, and of the importance of woman in the Etruscan society. In fact, woman is portrayed with the husband or even alone and used to conserve her family name all the life long. The most famous statues from the Etruscan graves are conserved in Rome, in the National archaeological museum.

From Cortona, you overlook the Val di Chiana valley, a green and flourishing valley. Two main stones of Tuscan culture, wine and Chianina cows, used until the end of 2WW to plough the land, can be referred to Etruscan History: It was also during the late 8 and 7th century BC period that grapes were introduced to the Italian peninsula. Grape seeds found in early Etruscan grave sites in Chiusi, show that the predecessor of Chianti had arrived. Craters and other vessels of Greek design started to appear. Olive oil arrived later, probably from Magna Grecia (south of Italy) Of probable origin Umbro-Etruscan, the bovines Chianini are raised from at least 2200 years in the valley of the Tevere high and in the Valdichiana, from where the breeding has extended to other provinces of Central Italy (Arezzo, Florence, Livorno, Perugia etc...)

From there, you can reach the Trasimeno lake, that can be visited with a boat trip or just enjoyed from a village terrace: if you have not the time for a boat trip, drive to Castiglione del Lago. You are on the border of Umbria region. The Trasimeno is famous for his lake fish: the "Carpa Regina in Porchetto" .