

# Tarquinius FREE

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## Summary

Tarquinius was one of the foremost Etruscan cities. It stood on the high Civita plateau pointing towards the sea between two flat hills. One of these is the Monterozzi plateau, which is the site of the superb painted tombs of its outstanding necropolis (UNESCO site since 2004). Long lasting excavation undertaken on the Civita plateau and at the sanctuary of Gravisca make it possible to recover the features of architectural structures, local artefact production, and related behaviours, including contacts with the other Mediterranean populations. The more than ten centuries of activity discovered at the ‘monumental complex’ offer an extraordinary overview of the history of Tarquinius and of its cultural features. The four phases of the Ara della Regina sanctuary (from the beginning of the 6th century to the Roman period), together with evidence from the ‘monumental complex’, support the reconstruction of the organisation of space, within the circuit of the fortification according to the principle of a sacred topography conceived by the community of Tarquinius from its beginnings.

**Keywords:** Tarquinia, Tarchna, Etruscan religion, Etruscan civilisation, human sacrifice, Etruscan sigla

**Subjects:** Ancient Geography, Roman Material Culture

### Updated in this version

Article rewritten to reflect current scholarship.

*Tarquinius* (Gr. TARKONION, TARKOUINAI, TARKYINIOI, TARKYNIA, TARKUNIOI, TARQUINI; Etr. Tarχ(u)na-) stood on a high plateau (133 m. (436 ft) above sea level) about 90 km. (56 mi.) from Rome and 6 km. (3.5 mi.) inland. The site of the ancient city, the Civita plateau, has remained free of modern construction to this day. Its modern name is Tarquinia (it having been called Corneto from the medieval period onwards, Corneto Tarquinia in 1872, and then simply Tarquinia since 1922). It stands on the edge of the Monterozzi plateau, the site of the superb painted tombs of its outstanding necropolis (a UNESCO site since 2004) and preserves traces of an extensive Villanovan settlement beneath the Etruscan tumuli (Calvario village).



**Figure 2.** Site (Google Earth, 2018) of the Calvario Village on the Monterozzi plateau, by Matilde Marzullo (UniMI-Archivio Etruscologia).

Much of the work on Tarquini had to do with funerary material before M. Bonghi Jovino started the Tarquinia Project to study the settlement on the Civita plateau in 1982, firmly believing in the valuable perspective of Paola Pelagatti's undertaking to excavate the main Etruscan cities. This happened after the successful results of the excavations of the important *emporion* sanctuary of Gravisca, which started in 1969 along with intense and continuing research focused on Etruscan necropolis.

The plateau points towards the sea between two plateaux. One of the two is the Monterozzi plateau, standing between the site of the ancient city and the coast, where Gravisca (see trade, Greek) is located.

Ongoing and well-published long-term excavations undertaken on the Civita plateau (see "monumental complex" and "Ara della Regina") and at Gravisca make it possible to recover features of architectural structures and local artefact production. They are crucial to exploring one of the most interesting relationships between the Etruscans and the Greeks known in the

ancient world, particularly vis-à-vis similarities and differences in the design of inhabited areas intended for frequentation by foreign individuals motivated by the same desire of contact and exchange.

Over several decades, archaeologists have brought to light evidence of human actions and behaviour that are essential for reconstructing the cultural and historical framework of the territory, an area at the very core of the Etruscans' own awareness of their religion. In fact, according to a number of literary sources, Tarchon, the hero founder of Tarquinia, is responsible for the foundation of both the city and the Etruscan religion, through the legend of his miraculous meeting with Tages.<sup>1</sup> He was a boy born already old, who sprang from a clod in the territory of Tarchna and taught Tarchon the principles of the Etruscan religion and of prophecy.

The relationship between Tarchon and Tages is crucial to the Etruscans general self-perception because Tarchon was also the hero founder of the Etruscan federation of the *Duodecim populi* (Verg. *Aen.* 2.278); this means that the Etruscans were both aware of the extraordinary origin of their religion and its close links with the beginnings of their civilisation. Tarquinii, through its hero founder Tarchon, is, therefore, of the utmost importance in defining the major features of Etruscan civilisation. The general framework of his impact on Etruscan history and culture emerges from Greek and Latin literary sources. They mention Tarquinii as the reputed refuge (after 657 BCE) of the Corinthian merchant Demaratus and the homeland of his son Tarquinius Priscus, who became king of Rome. Later Tarquinii fought against Rome in the second half of the 4th century BCE, established a long truce, provided Rome with linen for the sails of Roman battleships during the Second Punic War (205 BCE), and became a *municipium* of the Stelatina tribe in 90 BCE. One of the most flourishing towns of the Etruscans, the *urbs Etruriae florentissima*, (Cic. *Rep.* 2.19.34) had farms (boar and snails) (Plin. *HN* 8.211; 9.174) and was a hunting reserve (Plin. *HN* 36.168).



**Figure 1.** The territory of Tarquinia, location of the Civita and Monterozzi plateaux, and of the sanctuary of Gravisca (after Bagnasco Gianni and Fiorini, “Between Tarquinia and Gravisca,” 2018).

## Civita Plateau

Since 1982, excavations on the Western part of the Civita plateau have revealed the ‘monumental complex’, one of the most ancient Etruscan areas with continuous frequentation from the 10th century BCE to the Roman imperial period; and since 1983, the archaic phases of the Ara della Regina sanctuary have been brought to light.<sup>2</sup> Investigations carried out in cooperation with the Politecnico of Milan started in 2009 to assess the extent and the features of the Etruscan city settled on the Civita plateau and the circuit of the fortifications along the edge of the plateau (about 8 km (about 5 mi.)). Such investigations took advantage of multidisciplinary tools (historical topography and palaeoenvironmental and geoarchaeological studies), in addition to archaeology and epigraphy, supported by ICT and GIS technology, including LiDAR, that produced the 3D model of the Civita plateau. The related survey yielded a funerary monument datable to the 6th century BCE in the vicinity of the late Hellenistic necropolis of the Morre del Pian di Civita by the north-western slope of the plateau.



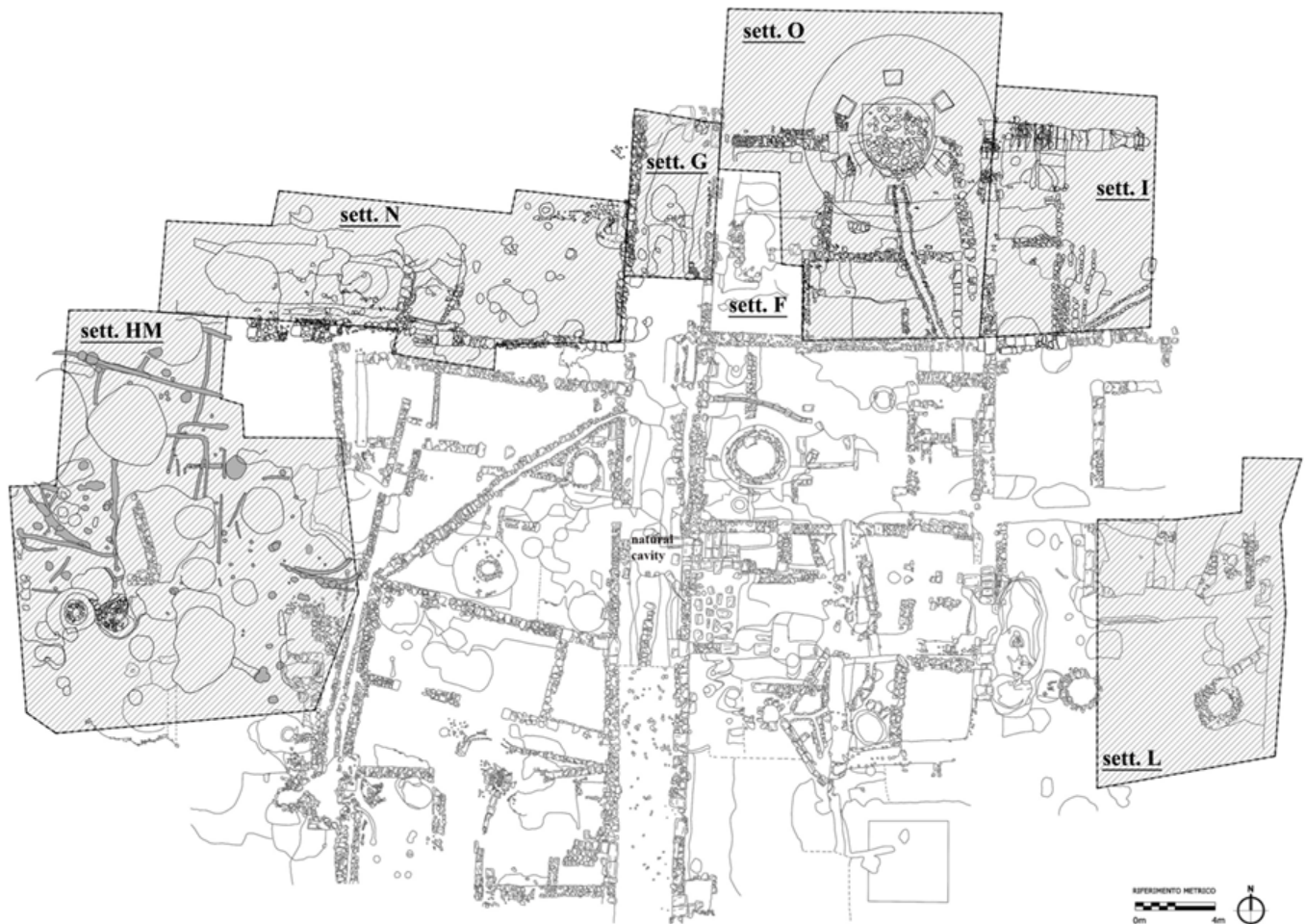
**Figure 3.** Tarquinia, Civita plateau, map of the fortifications, gates and roads (after Marzullo, *Tarquini*).

## Monumental Complex

From the beginning of the Villanovan period (from the late 10th to the 8th century BCE), the area was intensively frequented and probably to a wider extent (a quarter of a hectare [over half an acre]).

Around a natural cavity produced by the calcareous nature of the Civita plateau, offerings were made to an unnamed divinity of Nature who starts as a natural force and over time accumulates new attributes, partly through contact with other peoples of the Mediterranean, and becomes increasingly recognizable as a divinity of the life cycle of the animal and vegetable realms.





**Figure 4.** Tarquinia, map of the 'monumental complex', by Andrea Garzulino (UniMI-Archivio Etruscologia).

From the very beginning, there were the remains of huts, ovens, and pavements produced by crushing and pressing the local *macco* (calcareous stone) to obtain strata of stone of varying thickness for several purposes. This is the earliest evidence so far of a technique that continues to be used from this point on as one of the typical architectural features of the 'monumental complex'.

From the start of the 9th century onwards, the centrality of the natural cavity within the area is made ever more evident by the traces of activities close to it. These are evident from layers of ashes and a series of small pits containing potsherds and animal bones, and the deposition of a child in a quadrangular area close to the cavity. This burial would come to be crucial for the site (Area A (*area alpha*)). Paleoanthropological analyses reveal that he was a boy of about 8 years old with encephalopathy and epilepsy (CAH 4<sup>2</sup> (1988), plate 295). He was clearly the object of prolonged subsequent veneration. That his memory was maintained over the centuries is shown by an Etruscan inscription dating three centuries later (end of the 6th century BCE) found near the cavity: *terela*. This is the Etruscan word corresponding to the Latin *prodigium* and Greek *teras*, which are both terms indicating an exceptional phenomenon, immediately recalling the story of the prophetic child Tages. It could, then, be claimed that this real child is the inspiration for the legend of Tages or alternatively that his body was associated in antiquity with Tages.

From the mid-8th century BCE onwards, the natural cavity continues to be surrounded by perishable structures and additional human interments, including sacrificed individuals, and votive deposits mark cultic areas.

The anthropological features of the skeleton of an adult man buried in an area north-east of the cavity carved deep into the bedrock around the mid-8th century BCE suggest a foreigner accustomed to slippery surfaces, as has been proved by paleoanthropological analysis, and killed with a blow to the head; he was probably a seafarer and may have been from the Aegean, on the evidence of the fabric of a Geometric pottery shard found in connection with him. This discovery may point to coordinated overseas contact and the presence of foreigners, so far mostly detected in the funerary equipment of the necropolis (Poggi orientali).

Between the middle of the 8th century BCE and the Orientalizing period (the first quarter of the 7th to the first quarter of the 6th century BCE), *area alpha* and the surrounding zones were paved with various *macco* layers and equipped with a number of structures of circular or subcircular shape assembled with recurring layers of earth, clay, and charcoal. At the end of the 8th century BCE, three newborns were buried here, and walls in blocks of local *macco* were built around them, showing the intent to render the previous perishable structures that probably surrounded *area alpha* permanent; in the vicinity, similar arrangements were found alternating with circular and subcircular areas directly excavated into the bedrock.

During the Orientalizing period, Mediterranean contacts continue to be evident in the technical features of the masonry (pilaster walls linked by sections of smaller stones influenced by Eastern models), particularly in Building B (*edificio beta*), which was built to the east of the natural cavity. Measuring 6.5 × 11.0 m (21 × 36 ft), the building was oriented 97°, and was divided into two axial rooms, the inner of which contained a bench/altar in one corner, delimited on one side by large stone blocks and by a channel carved in the soil to convey liquids into the natural cavity. Discovered in 1985, three bronze objects (an axe, a *lituus* (“wand”), and a shield), folded and placed one above the other, in front of the main entrance to the east, show the evident religious and institutional purpose of the ‘monumental complex’. A sherd of an impasto ware cup found in secondary deposition in the surroundings of the bench/altar of Building B, helps in establishing the status of the individual responsible for its dedication to the goddess. It, like the three bronze objects, is datable at the latest to the first quarter of the 7th century BCE, and bears the Etruscan inscription, *mi kalaṇ* [---], which is a loanword from the Greek *kallinikos*. This epithet is ascribed to the Greek hero Heracles in his apotheosis and matches the attributes of the Phoenician Melqart in Thasos from the first half of the 7th century BCE (Archilochus). This figure could, therefore, here be a consort to a goddess resembling Phoenician Astarte and Uni, the foremost female goddess of the Etruscans, whose name appears on a number of inscriptions at the ‘monumental complex’ from the second half of the 7th century BCE onwards.

Between the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 6th century, the local pottery production of wares previously strongly influenced by Greek geometric styles circulating in the Mediterranean is now open to new techniques of production, firing, and decoration imbued with the so-called “international” (Mediterranean) band style. This is a direct consequence of the nearly

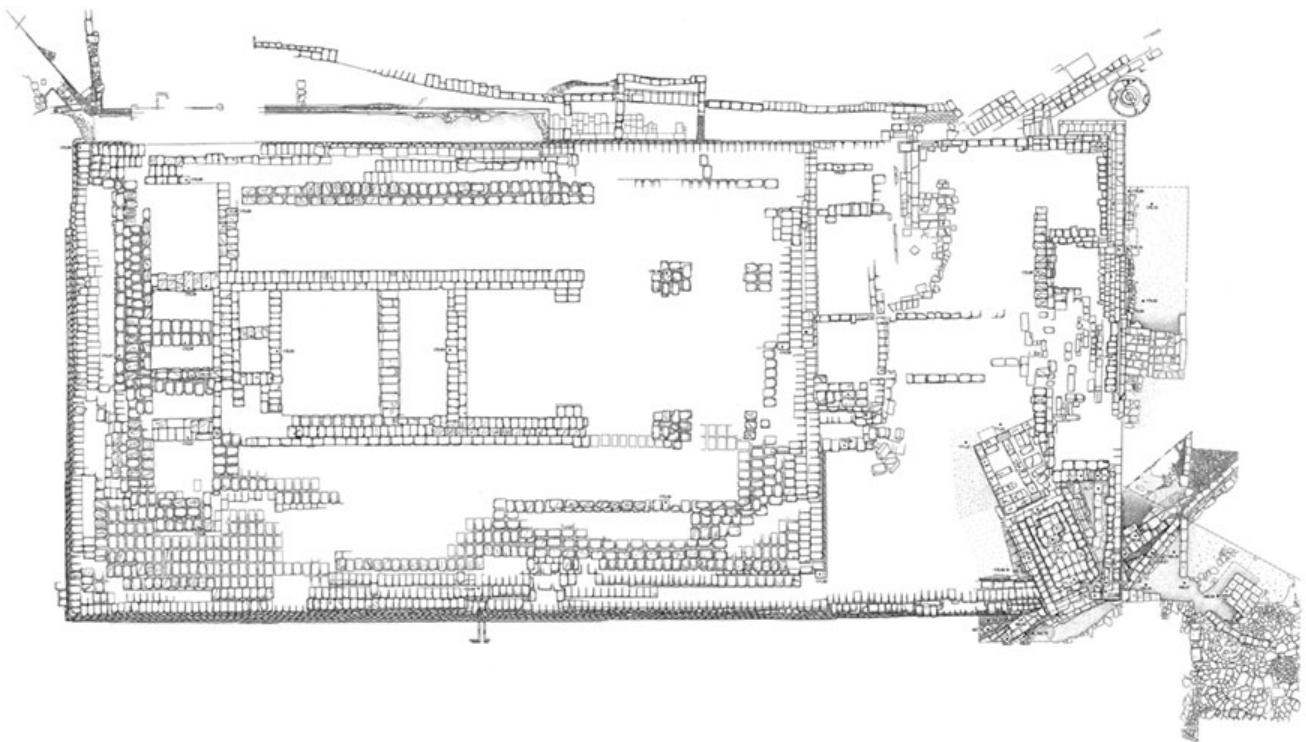
contemporaneous opening of the *emporion* sanctuary of Gravisca, which hosted Greeks from Phocaea from its earliest days. Their presence probably inspired the need to give the natural force the name Uni, who is the foremost goddess of the Etruscans.

After the basic characteristics had been settled in its first crucial phases of foundation, the 'monumental complex' was permanently established in the Archaic period, when the goddess was addressed as *Xiiti*, which was inscribed on an impasto sherd, a name that reveals her chthonian aspect. The layout of the previous phases was kept intact, marked by the pilaster wall and architectural devices such as stone blocks and structures made of raw stone and earth which mark previous cultic Villanovan locations and preserve their memory.

The discovery of a mosaic floor and of the filling of a well (mid-2nd century BCE) have augmented our knowledge of the Hellenistic period and of the final phases of the 'monumental complex' during the encounter with Rome before the independence of Tarquinia came to an end.

### Ara della Regina Sanctuary

The sanctuary preserves the largest temple of the Etruscans known to date. One of the most impressive architectural accomplishments of the whole sanctuary is the enlargement of the hill by means of a high base of regular levelling courses of stone blocks (34 × 55 m (111 × 180 ft)) and the production of an even ground level. The temple was raised on top of this base in four main phases, built one on top of the other, from 570 BCE onwards. Temple I, with one elongated *cella* (cell), was refurbished around 530 BCE with two *alae* (wing) and incorporated into Temple II. Archaic terracotta remnants include fragments depicting Heracles' deeds, as suggested by the plaque with the cattle of Geryon and a pedimental high relief that features the Hydra.





**Figure 5.** Tarquinia, map of the Ara della Regina sanctuary (after Bonghi Jovino, Bagnasco Gianni, *Tarquinia*).

The area in front of the east entrance to both temples, roughly oriented east–west, had a similar layout, being delimited and contained at the same time by a wall built of blocks of rock of different colours. So far 40 m (130 ft) of it has been scanned by means of modern technology.<sup>3</sup> Its purpose was also to support a stone chest with an orientation (340°) that differed from that of the temples (95°). It was located in front of the south–east corner of the area in front of the temples. Since excavations on the terrace in the first half of the last century yielded a fragment of an inscribed marble slab probably bearing the name of Tarchon, the stone chest has been interpreted as his cenotaph.

During the third phase of the sanctuary (beginning of the 4th century BCE), the multicoloured wall was partially destroyed and covered by the south–eastern corner of the terrace, but it was left exposed in front of both its eastern and its southern edges. The stone chest was sealed under an altar built in front of the two archaic temples from blocks of local stone, sloping upwards at a constant 340° angle, and extending southwards out of the huge terrace. Given that the altar, together with an adjacent precinct built of red tufa located to the north, was enclosed by the temple's terrace and had no dedicated access ramp, it could only have had a symbolic value. It probably represented Tarchon's heroon, due to the presence of two holes connecting it with the stone chest underneath to receive liquid offerings.

According to the dating of its stylistic features, the famous terracotta plaque of the “Winged Horses Group,” adorned Temple III in this phase. The identification of the group with the story of Heracles' apotheosis on Mt. Oeta, after he was burnt on the pyre, is supported by two more terracotta fragments showing the same style, technique, and ceramic composition, and by comparison with the iconography of two large vases (Attic and Apulian). According to their iconography, it is possible that the scene was similarly distributed over several levels within a “closed” pediment.

The orientation of the symbolic altar within the terrace at the Ara della Regina that preserves the memory of Tarchon could also be a result of the connections between Tarchon and Heracles, since Tarchon shared Heracles' Lydian ancestry. The theme of the apotheosis of Heracles was introduced in the ‘monumental complex’ at Tarquinia in the first quarter of the 7th century BCE, and continued in the city at least until the beginning of the 4th century BCE when the pediment of Temple III in the Ara della Regina sanctuary was created.

The orientation of the main sacred areas at Tarquinia is unusual from an Etruscan perspective, since Etruscan temples are usually oriented along the southern sky arc that extends between the points where the sun rises and sets at the winter solstice and may express, in a physical and architectural way, some understanding of how the community at Tarquinia perceived their city's position in space and time and conceived of their sacred topography.

Temple IV represents the final refurbishment identified so far; it is late Hellenistic, as can be seen in the last addition to it: the two arms flank the stairway to the terrace and the blocks of black stone (*nenfro*) frame its key points, which are the transverse altar built above the cenotaph and the cenotaph itself.

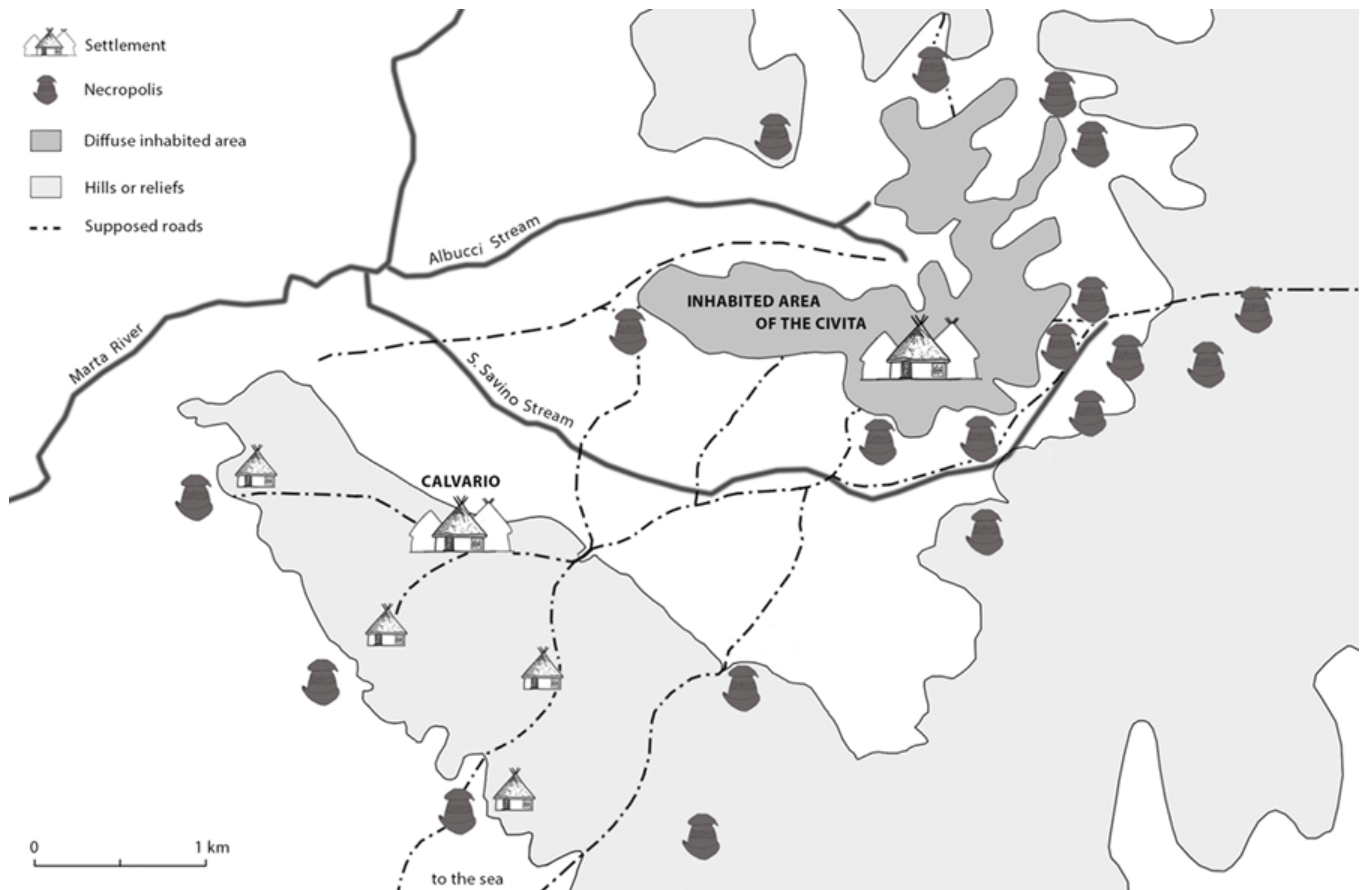
During the Roman period a series of rooms were built against the northern side of the temple. They contained the commemorative monument of one of the earlier famous families of Tarquinii citizens. It bears Latin inscriptions known as the *Elogia Tarquiniensia* describing the careers and exploits of its members and thus reflecting local Etruscan history.

## Necropoleis

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The hilltops surrounding the site of the ancient Villanovan settlements (Pian di Civita, Calvario) are occupied by cemeteries which show a clear distinction between the two areas of occupation.<sup>4</sup> Materials from tombs that can be dated alongside the phases of activity of the settlement are seminal for the study of Etruscan arts and crafts of this period. During its later phase, vases are decorated with a particular mixture of various Greek geometric styles, showing a common effort of the Greeks in their westward expansion. Conceived by the Greeks, it was assessed as a whole by the indigenous community, which was confident enough to accept foreign contributions, including those from northern Europe and the Baltic Sea area (the Tomb of Bocchoris and the Tomb of the Warrior), and integrate them into specific ritual and ceremonial frames, according to the prominent role of Tarquinii during the 8th century BCE.

The greatest glory of Tarquinii is the necropolis on the Monterozzi plateau, with its roughly 6,200 tombs, of those so far discovered. They are of various types from the Villanovan to the Roman period.



**Figure 6.** The territory of Tarquinia in the 8th century BCE, by Matilde Marzullo (UniMI-Archivio Etruscologia).

The painted chamber tombs known at the moment number 400 ca. A number of artists' sketches, reproductions, and scholars' descriptions show that painted tombs were well known from the Renaissance on.

During the 18th century, the century of the grand tour and the rise in Italian interest in Etruscan culture (*Etruscheria*), excavations and research increased until the 19th century, when systematic campaigns of exploration took place, and then in the second half of the 20th century, when the Lericci Foundation started investigating using new technology.<sup>5</sup>

After the 18th century a more art historical approach was taken, and in recent decades there have been attempts to organize a comprehensive corpus of tomb paintings and to expand it by looking for the earliest material.<sup>6</sup> Tombs have continued to be discovered, and the complete corpus has recently been published.<sup>7</sup>

This research has shown that painted tombs represent 8% of those discovered so far, and has redefined their chronological limits as from the Orientalizing (end of the 7th century BCE) to the Hellenistic period.

The painted tombs of Tarquinii are an extraordinary heritage from the point of view of their quality and quantity and make it possible to identify particular choices of the local community, which shaped their formation and development. Unlike other Etruscan cities, where the goal was

the representation of the house of the dead, at Tarquinius the basic motivation for decoration was the establishment of distinctive and long-lasting criteria in the organization of space. These criteria were inspired by the principles of orientation established by the norms of the Etruscan religion and involve the concept of *templum sub terra*, that is, as a means of communication with the supernatural world. This real but conceptual and virtual space facilitated the transition to the afterlife.

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## Notes

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1. J. R. Wood, "The Myth of Tages," *Latomus* 39, no. 2 (1980): 325–344.
2. The results are currently published in the *Tarchna* series and in a number of scientific contributions. <http://www.etruscologia.unimi.it/index.php/progetti/9-uncategorised/129-produzione-scientifica>
3. The technology used was Lerici foundation soundings and ITAB-CNR georadar prospection.
4. For tomb groups of the Villanovan period, see Hencken, *Tarquinius*.
5. Minox cameras.
6. Steingraber, *Etruskische Wandmalerei*; Naso, *Architetture dipinte*.
7. Marzullo, *Grotte Cornetane*; Marzullo, *Spazi sepolti e dimensioni dipinte nelle tombe etrusche di Tarquinia*.



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