

CERVETERI

Introduction

In the southern part of Etruria, the Etruscan city of Caere, now Cerveteri, lies 40 km north of Rome. It is one of the main city-states of the league of the twelve Confederate Etruscan cities, which controlled a large strip of the Tyrrhenian coast. Still scarcely established in the Villanovan age, between the 9th and 8th centuries BC, the city experienced a rapid expansion in the 7th century, during the so-called "Orientalizing" period, thanks to its contacts with Greek and Phoenician merchants, who contributed to radically changing the culture and economy of the local populations. These relations took place in particular in the port of the city, Pyrgi, where several temples, in particular that of Uni/Astarte, presided over trade relations between Etruscans and foreign merchants. This period is marked by the emergence of a ruling class of princes, whose power progressively declined from the beginning of the 6th century B.C. onwards, to lead to a more egalitarian society. The alliance with nearby Rome was progressively strengthened after the sacking of the Gauls in 390 BC, during which the Vestals had found refuge in Caere, but new clashes between the two cities led to the defeat of the Etruscan metropolis in 273 B.C. and to confiscation of the coastal part of its territory, where Rome founded several maritime colonies. In the Augustan Age, Caere is mentioned by Strabo only as a "small town".

History

The ancient city, which covered an extension of 150 hectares, enclosed within a powerful wall, remains little known, with the exception of some temples and part of its civic centre. But the urban area is entirely surrounded by an immense necropolis, which encloses in its approx. 400 hectares tens of thousands of burials, with some of the most spectacular tombs in the whole of Etruria. The best known sepulchral area is the Banditaccia, to the west of the city (about 100 hectares), crossed by the so-called "via degli Inferi". The first tombs, dating back to the Villanovan age, are simple incinerations: the ashes of the dead were deposited, often inside a stone case, accompanied by few objects. From the middle of the 7th century B.C., however, these humble tombs were replaced by enormous circular mounds resting on circles of moulded tuff blocks, whose diameter can reach 60 m, under which one or more family tombs were excavated inside family tombs. The deceased, buried, were accompanied by a large number of precious objects, mainly local ceramics (in particular black *bucchero*) or imported from Greece (with black or red figures), which testify to the belief in a form of life of the deceased in the afterlife. Already during the 6th century, at the same time as the affirmation of an affluent middle class, the mound was replaced by square tombs dug out of tufa, in the form of dice or plain facade, which allowed for a more rational exploitation of the funerary space, now conceived according to the urbanistic model of the orthogonal city. As in the tombs of previous ages, their interior features a series of elements alluding to the architecture of true houses, as well as various furnishing elements, such as funeral beds or thrones. In the 4th century, the tombs became less conspicuous, with some notable exceptions: the walls of the tomb of the Reliefs are entirely decorated with stuccoed and painted reliefs, portraying the daily activities of the living.

Rediscovery and restoration

Already looted in ancient times, the necropolises of Cerveteri were systematically excavated in search of precious objects for the trade in antiquities, starting from the 1830s, and from this date until the present day, they have been the object of constant interventions by local illegal excavators, the so-called "tombaroli". The materials of these first digs, in particular those collected during the huge excavation work carried out by the Marquis Campana and the Castellani brothers, are scattered among numerous museums in Italy and around the world, in particular in the Museum of Villa Giulia, in Rome, and in the Musée du Louvre, in Paris. But we often ignore their precise provenance, as in the case of the two famous "sarcophagi of the bride and groom" from the Campana collection, almost life-size, now preserved in Rome and Paris. In the 20th century the necropolis was explored with more scientific criteria, between 1909 and 1936, by Raniero Mengarelli, who restored a limited area of the necropolis, called the "Vecchio Recinto" ("Old Enclosure"), so that it could be opened to the public; later, starting from the sixties, systematic excavations and restoration works were carried out by Massimo Pallottino and Luigi Moretti. In the 1980s, the necropolis was also the object of extensive geophysical prospecting carried out by the Lerici Foundation, one of the first so far carried out in Italy, but very few tombs have been found intact in recent times. In 2004, UNESCO included on the World Heritage List the two Etruscan Necropolises of Cerveteri and Tarquinia, the first famous for its funerary architecture sculpted in the bedrock, the second for the paintings of its tombs, on the basis of three criteria: their quality as masterpieces of human genius, revealing the Etruscan conceptions of life and death; their reflection of the world of the living which offers us a precious testimony of the only pre-Roman urban civilisation in Italy, allowing the reconstruction of buildings which no longer exist today, even in the details of their furnishings.