Italy’s Tarquinia: What the Tomb Raiders Missed

BY KAY SIMMEN

Tarquinia, Italy — The small bull looks straight at us, serene and unthreatening, but seemingly as 
toasted at the explicit scenes of heterosexual and homosexual lovemak- 
taking place all around him. We are looking at the wall paintings in the 
Tomb of the Bulla in the ancient city of Tarquinia.

Surprisingly, few Americans visit the 
Etruscan tombs in Tarquinia, which is 
about 90 miles northwest of Rome and 
easily accessible by car or train. More's the pity, for the trip here is one 
of the most rewarding to be found in 
the environs of the capital, coming, 
as it does, an excursion to the shore with a glimpse into one of the 
most interesting cultures of the ancient world.

The trip takes in sharp detail a story of 
man's sensuality through the ages, 
revealing a harrowing record of tomb-raiding at the site from ancient times to 
the present. It provides as well a rare 
insight into the newest techniques of 
archaeological excavation. Developments 
which in the late 1950's helped bring to 
light in the area about a thousand tombs 
previously undetected. (Until then, no 
single painted tomb had been discover- 
ed here since the Tomb of the Bulla 
was found in 1862.)

We took the bus out of Rome for 
the $15 full-day, all-inclusive trip to 
Tarquinia (it runs Tuesdays and Fridays 
between April 1 and Oct. 31), and our 
guide, Fosco, a pleasant young woman, 
turned out to be not only multilingual 
but well-informed on Etruscan archen- 
yology. The tour first took us to Lake Brac- 
chiano and then to Cerveteri (the ancient 
Caere) where we viewed the large rock 
tombs, round tumuli with vertical stone 
rings resembling giant soufflé dishes and 
housing almost complete replicas of 
horses with stone furniture. They were 
interesting, but nothing compared to 
what was to come in Tarquinia, about 
a short miles to the northwest.

Our first view of Tarquinia was of 
a large flat field with numerous little 
knolls (the entrances to the tomb) scat- 
tered here and there, each with its own 
electric light pole and wires. We had 
previously picked up an elderly gentri- 
man dangled a bunch of about 30 keys, 
and he proceeded to open those tombs 
which Fosco suggested.

We started with the Tomb of the 
Augurs. The door is unlooked and we are 
led down some stone steps by the light 
of a single bare light bulb. An un- 
believably busy scene emerges from 
the wall paintings. Two naked, reddish- 
colored men seem to be wrestling, with 
flowers resembling oversized lilies of 
the valley painted below and large birds 
above.

On another wall, a masked nude dancer 
shovels in violent motion, a bird in flight 
near his head, another bird walking on 
the ground. We are told that the 
Tarquinians regarded birds as omens of vic- 
tory: if they fly toward you, victory will 
be yours; if they fly away from you, 
not bad. We take available-light pho- 
tographs (flash pictures are not per- 
mitted) for future study

On to the Tomb of the Baron, named

KAY SIMMEN is a New York-based pro-

fessional photographer with a special 
interest in archenology.

Some of the tomb frescoes, those most 
in danger of deterioration, have been 
decorated from their backing and are on 
display at the museum in tent-like struc-
tures. The Tomb of the Triclinium is one 
of these (a triclinium is the couch used 
by the Romans for dining, and hence by 
extension simply a dining room). It 
shows a banquet scene including dancers 
and musicians, and is badly faded. 
The tomb was painted around 470 B.C., 
ed- 
terial, and it shows remark-

able sophistication in the treatment of 
the dancers and their transparent 
garments.

It is this sophistication that deepens 
the mystery of the paintings, a mystery 
as baffling as the history of the Etrus-
cans themselves. No one really knows 
where the Etruscans came from. Some 
believe, as did Herodotus writing in the 
fifth century B.C., that they originated in 
Asia Minor; others hold them to be 
an indigenous people of this region. 
Today, many scholars tend to reconcile 
both theories and consider them migrants 
from the eastern Mediterranean who 
mixed with an already vital native popu-
lation to produce the civilization that 

Continued on Page 31

ETRUSCAN TREASURES—A visit to the Etruscan tombs at Tarquinia, the author says, "etches in 
sharp detail a story of man's sensuality through the ages, revealing a harrowing record of tomb-raiding 
from ancient times to the present." Pictured here is Tarquinia's Tomb of the Leopard.
What the Tarquinia Tomb Raiders Missed

Continued From Page 17

was in full bloom around 700 B.C. and lasted for about 600 years until its absorption by the Romans.

We do know that at their height the Etruscans occupied approximately that portion of western Italy that lies between the Tiber and the Arno—between Rome and Florence—and constituted a federation of 12 city-states. The Etruscans were skilled artisans and technicians who grew rich by working iron from the island of Elba as well as other metals from the Appenines and traded widely, especially with the Greeks and in the Orient. They believed in divination based on the study of the entrails of animals and the flight of birds. They practiced human sacrifice, rode chariots and were expert potters, goldsmiths, bronze workers and sculptors and, of course, excellent painters.

Noteworthy Collections

This has spurred rather than hindered interest in the Etruscans. Art museums all over the world are filled with treasures that the Etruscans either created or amassed by trade during their extensive commerce with Greece and the East. While many recent finds are displayed in the local museum of Tarquinia, housed in the former Palazzo Vitelleschi, especially noteworthy collections are at the National Museum of the Villa Giulia in Rome, the Gregorian Etruscan Museum in the Vatican, the Archeological Museum in Florence and, surprisingly, in the Etrusco-Roman section of the Hermitage in Leningrad. This popularity is, incidentally, not entirely new: as early as the first century B.C., Horace reported on the partiality that art lovers showed for Etruscan bronze statuettes.

In our time, interest in Etruscan art has been so intense that the field has been invaded by forgers. Many of us remember the imposing figure of the “Etruscan Warrior” long displayed by New York’s Metropolitan Museum until, alas, it turned out—a few years ago—to be a fake skillfully manufactured in Italy in 1914. The figure arrived convincingly fragmented and was painstakingly assembled by the museum’s experts, but today it rests ignominiously in the basement. Even in art, excessive popularity has its price.

Tombs raiding has taken its toll in Tarquinia and who knows how many peasants, plowing their fields, came across some shiny trinket to bring home to their children? Or how many wealthy landowners decorated their walls with home-grown treasure, as did Napoleon’s younger brother, the Prince of Canino, whose wife attended a reception of the Papal court in 1830 splendidly bedecked with jewels found on their estate. According to one authority, about 60 per cent of the recently discovered tombs in Tarquinia had been completely robbed of their contents.

At first, late in the 19th century, the tombs became Government property, although clandestine excavations and removals of art objects have apparently continued at an appalling rate.

Technological Aids

According to Raymond Bloch, a professor at the Sorbonne who has made a study of Etruscan archeology, three main technological aids are responsible for this enormous quickening of the rate of tomb discovery. First, aerial photography, particularly techniques developed during World War II. The Etruscan cemeteries were photographed from the air by Britain’s Royal Air Force and systematically studied by John Bradford, who published his findings in “Antiquity” in 1947. The cemeteries at Tarquinia and Cerveteri each cover an area of about 1,000 to 1,200 acres, and aerial photography was instrumental in revealing their exact layout.

The Etruscans had a written language that we can read (the letters derive from Greek) but not understand because it differs from all known languages of its time. A great number of texts, many of them merely short inscriptions, such as one in the Tomb of the Bulls, have resisted translation by scholars to this day.

Another scientific tool is the potentiometer, an instrument that measures and records the differences in electrical conductivity of the ground. If the physical uniformity of the subsoil is disrupted by obstacles such as archeological remains, the instrument will record differences in resistance. Graphs can be constructed based on groups of such readings, and the results will betray underground remains. This method is borrowed from the field of oil research and was first applied to archeology in 1946.

Somewhat later, an oil engineer-turned-archeologist, C. M. Lerici, successfully applied these techniques to the Etruscan tomb area. In 18 months in 1958 and 1959, a team from the Polytechnic Institute in Milan, under Lerici’s leadership, identified no less than a thousand new tombs in the Tarquinia area. Unfortunately, a high percentage of these had been entered at one time or another, and only about 40 per cent had any of their original contents left.

Photographic Ingenuity

With the enormous number of tombs known, a new technique was developed to enable archeologists to examine them for possible wall paintings and other contents before going to the considerable trouble of actual excavation. A hole about four inches in diameter is bored through the soil and roof of a newly identified tomb, and the area examined on the spot by means of a periscope. If things look promising, a camera is then lowered through the same hole and the entire contents and wall surfaces are photographed before the decision to dig is reached. Professor Bloch covers this technique in detail in “The Ancient Civilization of the Etruscans,” published by Cowles in 1969.

These three scientific tools—air photography, the potentiometer and the periscope viewing and photographing device—have in recent years accelerated the pace of discovery to such an extent that the Villa Giulia Museum in Rome has received literally thousands of Etruscan and Greek objects.

The increased discovery rate has also produced problems: the wall paintings, once they are exposed to the atmospheric changes of temperature and humidity from which they have so long been protected, are subject to deterioration. Already some of the frescoes, fresh and well-preserved when found, are disintegrating. There is also danger of damage from large numbers of visitors with only casual supervision.