



Orientalizing Etruscan tombs in Sesto Fiorentino

The Tomba della Montagnola
The Tomba della Mula

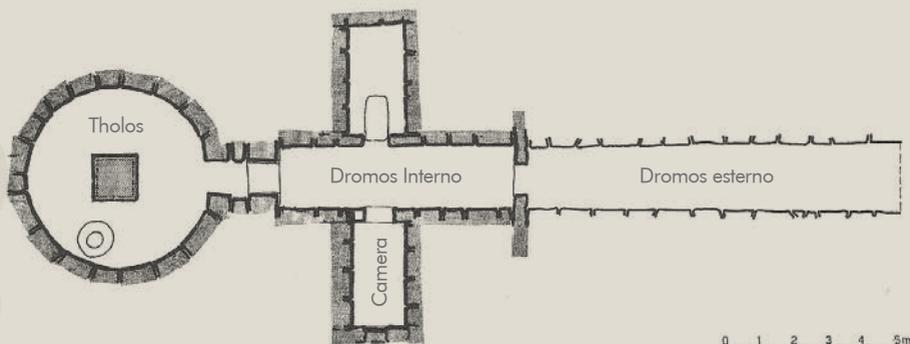
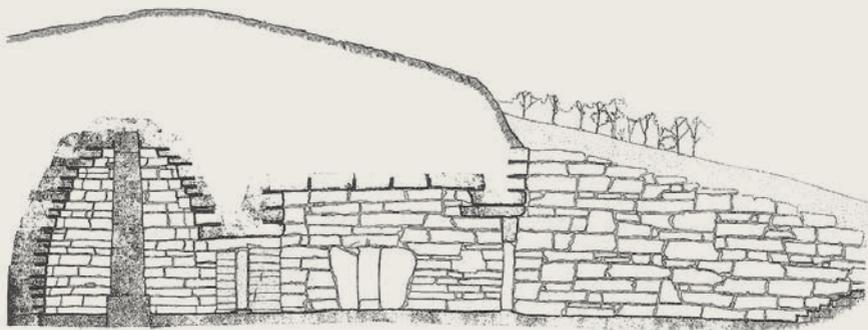


Soprintendenza Archeologia,
Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la città
metropolitana di Firenze e per le
province di Pistoia e Prato

The Tomba della Montagnola

In the spring of 1959, Superintendent Giacomo Caputo identified an extraordinary Etruscan tomb of the Orientalizing period (approximately 625 BC) in the Montagnola hill of Quinto Fiorentino. The structure was majestic: the chamber was equipped with a central pillar and covered by a false cupola of progressively protruding blocks and sealed

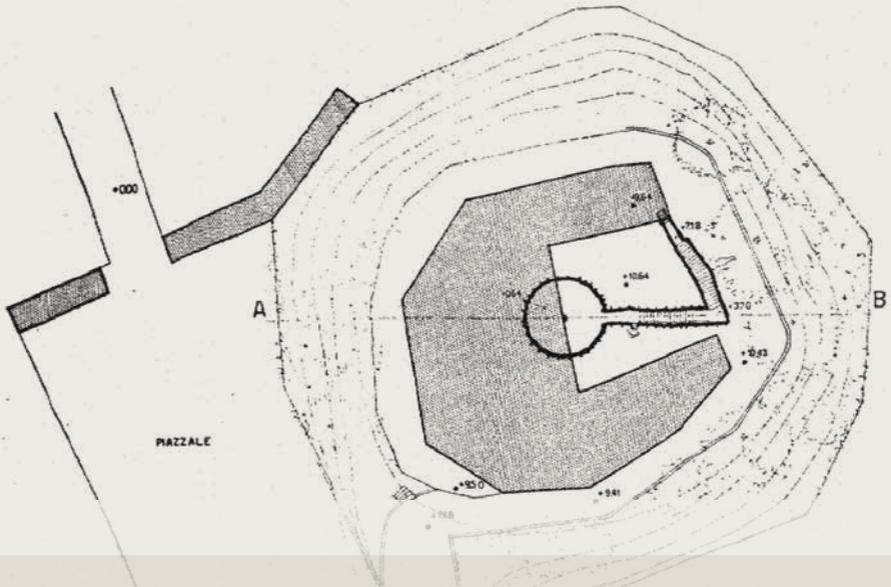
by a layer of clay constituting the artificial hillock of approximately seventy metres in diameter. Two smaller cells covered by a pseudo vault opened beside the access corridor. Several graffiti on the stucco of the door posts of the side cells entrance and the front side of the central pillar preserved inscriptions and other signs, such as zoomorphic and phytomorphic motifs.



The Tomba della Mula

Not far from the Montagnola arises another imposing Etruscan hillock, still perceivable in correspondence with the current Villa della Mula. For the privileged position offered by the artificial hill (approximately 70 metres in diameter) compared with the

underlying flatland, the location was chosen in the Middle Ages to build first a tower, then a villa, and it had already been identified in the 1500s as one of the Etruscan burials at "the feet of Monte Morello".



The Etruscan structure (650 - 630 BC), transformed into a cellar over the course of various building vicissitudes that involved the entire complex, is seen today with its 10-metre diameter circular chamber, access passage and splendid false cupola, probably originally equipped with the central pillar, to imagine almost in correspondence with today's cavity or "light well", which opens at the top of the *tholos*.

An intervention, performed by the Superintendence in recent years, involves the under-pavement layers of the burial chamber and a stretch of the entrance corridor, allowing the fortunate recovery of part of the ornaments, sufficient to encompass the extraordinary quantity and quality of the objects, even if fragmentary; they include iron weapons, gold sheets and historiated ostrich egg shells, as well as decorated with relief, carved and engraved ivory items (horse head, catlike body, female figure).

The construction of the tombs of Sesto Fiorentino

The magnificent tombs of Montagnola and Mula are structures characterised by a very evolved architectural project: the tomb structure is placed on a solid level of earth, and the walls and roof are raised by positioning the stone blocks to gradually project inward into the funerary chamber – reducing the space as the construction rises – closing the opening at the top with a single stone: it is a false vault, known as a *tholos*, and seen throughout the Mediterranean basin over time.

The secret of the construction rests in two elements: as the building rises, the successive layers of stone blocks protrude slightly into the space of the chamber, a distance of less than half the length of the block below, so the centre of gravity of the structure is always directed towards the outside of the tomb, without risk of

subsidence towards the empty space of the internal chamber; in addition, as the structure rises with regularly protruding rows of blocks, they are simultaneously fixed in place from the outside with high and solid carry-overs of clay, which guarantee the stability and waterproofing of the structure, giving the mound its characteristic hemispherical shape.

Within this type of project, it is clear that the central pillar placed under the single stone that closes the top of the vault is not load bearing; despite this, many tombs feature the *tholos* covering with a central pillar: in addition to Montagnola and, quite probably, the Mula of Sesto Fiorentino, they evoke the mounds of Montefortini in Carmignano, of Pietrera and Diavolino in Vetulonia, and in Casale Marittimo.



Research in the territory

In 1959, the discovery of the great Etruscan mound of Montagnola, in Sesto Fiorentino, by Giacomo Caputo, the Superintendent of Etrurian Antiquities, marked the beginning of a fruitful period of research and great archaeological discoveries in the area north of the Arno, particularly in the area between Florence and Prato. With the advancement

of the research, a complex and articulated image of the history has been defined.

Today, we know that during Prehistory and Protohistory, the Florentine plane hosted human communities who knew how to develop skills and original productions, communications and commercial and cultural exchanges.



We also know that the Etruscan age, particularly during the Orientalizing period (7th century BC), the entire territory, known in literature as the "Fiesolan territory" saw an extraordinary flowering, witnessed by the splendid funerary architecture of the necropoli of Artimino, Comeana and Carmignano, and the necropolis of Quinto at Sesto Fiorentino.

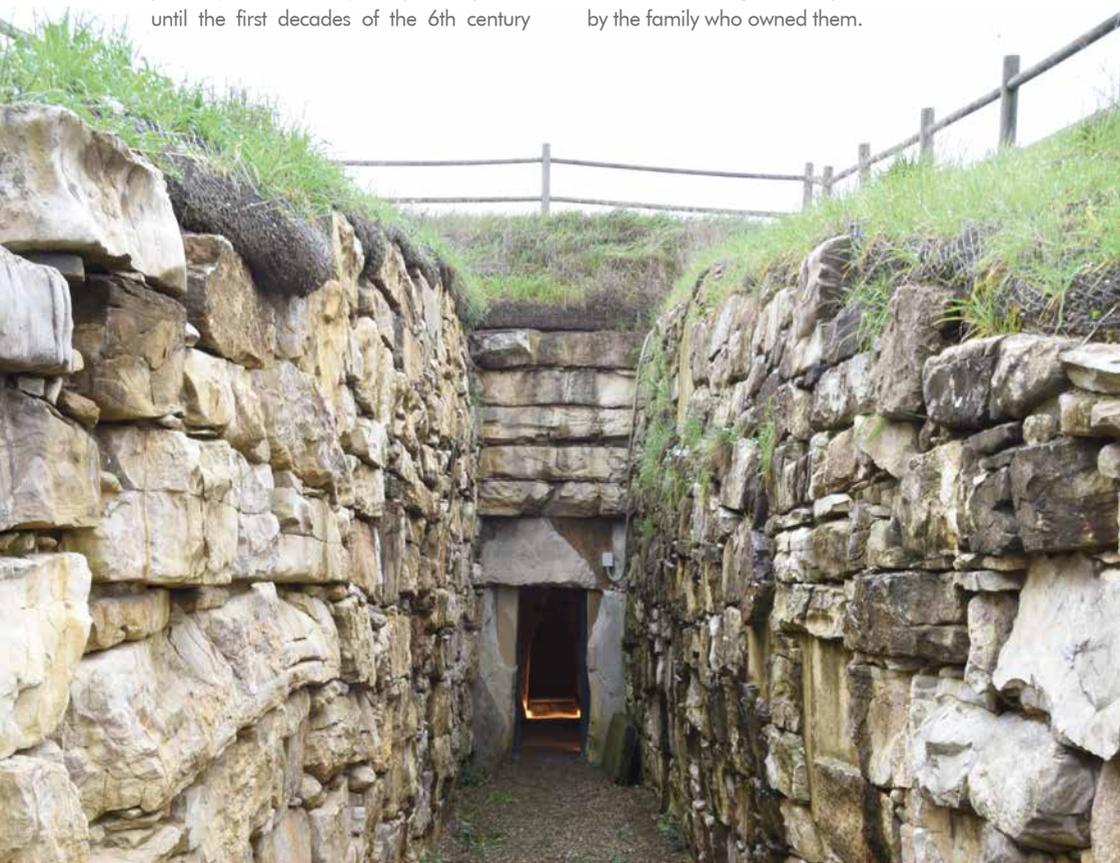
During the archaic period (6th - 7th centuries BC), while the territory was characterised by more capillary occupation, and by the constant presence of memorials and stele in sandstone with funerary functions, the so-called "Fiesolan stones", there was the foundation of a new city at Gonfienti, today divided between the municipalities of Prato and Campi Bisenzio, for the control of traffic towards the Bologna area and the markets of the Adriatic.

Etruscan mounds of the Orientalizing period in Sesto Fiorentino

In the Sesto landscape of the second half of the 7th century BC, in correspondence with the north western slope of the hill of Castellina, one can view the well-shaped tombs of the Palastroto necropolis together with the large princely mounts – at least three – located a short distance from each other on the lower part of the same slope: the Tomba della Mula, built between 650 and 630 BC, today incorporated in the cellar of the namesake villa; the Tomb of Montagnola, built in the current form during the initial phase of the Orientalizing period (630 - 620 BC) and probably used until the first decades of the 6th century

BC; a third and analogous *tholos*-shaped monumental tomb seems to have been discovered in 1820 in the garden of Villa Torrigiani – Villa Carter, today the park of Villa Solaria, perhaps destroyed a short time after its identification and substituted by a small artificial lake, drained some time later.

These mounds were located in correspondence to an important travel route, along which the large hemispherical structures could be viewed, to immediately understand the high level of power achieved by the family who owned them.





The Prince and his tomb

The peak of the Etruscan history in the Sesto territory – and more in general of the territory north of the Arno – is the Orientalizing period (7th century BC).

In this period, the testimonies referring to the funerary sphere allow the hypothesis of a stable and rooted presence of a hegemony class, the so-called “princes” – who held control over the territory, the business taking place and, most of all, the roads that cross it. Men and goods travelled on these roads, but also ideas, opportunities for connection and acquaintance between distant territories, as the archaeological finds show.

The prince, who in the second half of the 7th century BC commissioned the construction of the *tholos* of Montagnola or that of Mula, wanted to show his social prestige and high economic power through the ownership of these extraordinary architectural complexes and relative funerary ornaments.

With the funerary structure, he showed that he had skilled architects and an immense work force, in addition to high-quality stone, clay and wood; with the funerary ornaments, composed of rare and precious objects, relating to banquets, military parades and personal ornamentation, he boasted his privileges and his world view.

Some luxury products arrived in Etruria from the Near East, along with the most sought-after raw materials, like gold and ivory. Artisans arrived, experts in different technologies, masters able to transmit their skills and repositories of the Greco-oriental tradition to local operators. Workshops were established in different areas of the territory

where original languages developed over time and new artistic experiences were tried.

The grave goods of the Tomb of Montagnola include particular objects, both in ceramic (such as an Ionian bucchero alabastron, grey, with carved decorations, possibly coming from southern marine Etruria ⁶), and objects in gold (a miniature leech-shaped pin and a ribbon with rosettes ³, possibly appliqued onto fabric), in alabaster (Egyptian alabasters ⁴, referring to a type common in the West and in Greek/Oriental necropoli), in glass (a rare aryballos flask with relief decorations).

The decorated ostrich eggs and the numerous ivories deserve special compliments (1 - 2 - 5), among which are elements pertaining to a situla (bucket or vase) where the rich horizontal band of decorations include real and mythological animals, phytomorphic elements and a masculine figure with large falcon wings represented in the image of the “kneeling figure” (possibly Aristaeus), as well as chalices, plates, various types of covering elements and a portion of a folding stool, similar to those of the Bologna necropoli: this type of stool, considered typical of the Etruscan world from Latin sources (Silius Italicus attributed its origin to Vetulonia), was then adopted by the Roman world, as sella *curulis* (curule seat) reserved for magistrates.



1



2



3



4



5



6

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