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Author(s):
Jamie Aprile, Colleen Zori, and Davide Zori

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Seventh Century Etruscan Chamber Tomb Discovered at the Necropolis of San Giuliano, Central Italy

Jamie Aprile
Colleen Zori
Davide Zori

The interdisciplinary San Giuliano Archaeological Research Project (SGARP) targets the archaeological past of San Giuliano, a site approximately 70 km northwest of Rome (**fig. 1**).[1] San Giuliano lies within the hinterland of Etruria in the Cimini Hills, a forested and topographically challenging region of hills, plateaus, and ravines that forestalled political incorporation by coastal Etruscan city-states and hindered even Roman territorial advances. During the Middle Ages, this area formed a border between competing polities such as the Lombards and the Byzantines, and it later comprised a dynamic frontier of the Papal States. The region is understudied archaeologically and underrepresented in historical written sources. Today it continues to lie mostly unvisited by tourists in the broad shadow of Rome.

SGARP's overall goal is to reconstruct long-term changes in the human occupation of the San Giuliano plateau and the surrounding hills. The project seeks to investigate the Etruscan occupation, focusing on the location of the domestic settlement atop the San Giuliano plateau and the rock-cut tomb necropolis surrounding it, and to understand the transitions that followed, including incorporation into the Roman Empire, abandonment of the San Giuliano plateau, reoccupation and transformation as part of the medieval *incastellamento* process, and final abandonment of the site sometime before AD 1300.

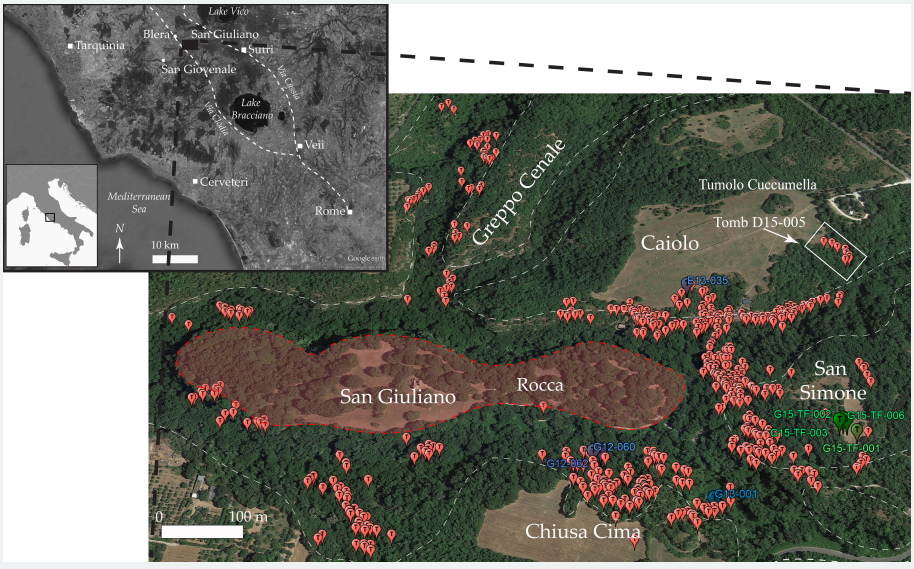

Figure. 1 The aerial photograph shows the positions of the chamber tombs (red balloons labeled T) recorded by the SGARP survey. The tombs are concentrated in the escarpments of the hills and plateaus that surround the eastern end of the San Giuliano plateau, suggesting that this area was the focus of domestic habitation in the Etruscan period. Excavated chamber tombs (tombe a camera) are shown in blue, while excavated trench tombs (tombe a fossa) are in green. The insert at top left shows the region of northern Lazio, from Rome in the south to Lake Vico in the north. Rome and Etruscan cities are indicated by squares, while smaller centers are indicated by circles. The Roman roads—Via Clodia and Via Cassia—are shown as dashed lines.

Excavation atop the San Giuliano plateau, where the Etruscan city once stood, has so far targeted the presumed acropolis area, currently known as La Rocca. Following

abandonment after Roman conquest, the plateau was reoccupied by at least AD 800 and refortified with the construction of a medieval stone castle between AD 1000 and 1100. The castle and its defenses consist of circuit walls, a dry moat, multiple gates, a tower, a large hall with an associated granary, and a Christian chapel with a surrounding graveyard (**fig. 2**). In the 2025 season, we focused on excavation of the medieval chapel, which incorporates remnants of the antique past, including the reuse of a Roman altar stone and construction atop the foundations of an earlier monumental Etruscan building. Our investigations indicate that the medieval occupation came to a relatively sudden end sometime in the second half of the thirteenth century, when the hall was leveled and the tower intentionally toppled, blocking access to the chapel. Our excavations, as well as ongoing isotope and aDNA analyses, are providing new insights into what life was like for the inhabitants of this eleventh to thirteenth century fortified settlement.

Some of the most exciting discoveries made by SGARP have been in our investigation of the ancient Etruscan funerary landscape of San Giuliano. During the 2025 season, we made the spectacular discovery of an untouched Etruscan chamber tomb dating to the seventh century BC.

Dubbed the Tomb of the Bird Vases, it was cut into the center of a large circular mound or tumulus, which the Etruscans had created by carving into the tuff bedrock. They had augmented its round shape by laying large tuff blocks around its edge. The tomb and the tumulus were not visible from the surface but were instead identified by careful work that began in 2016, the first season of SGARP investigations. We led with a pedes-trian tomb survey of the San Giuliano necropolis (2016–2018 seasons), during which we mapped and documented more than 600 previously looted chamber tombs. GIS analysis of the orientations of visible cham-ber tombs revealed that the facades of some tombs turned roughly west, not facing the acropolis of the Etruscan city as expected but instead facing what we hypothesized might be a funerary road leading out of the sixth and fifth century necropolis below and onto the top of the Caiolo plateau. To investigate the existence of this road and any associated features, we carried out a geophysical survey in 2019, employing magnetometry, ground-penetrating radar, and conductivity. The results of the conductivity survey were enticingly suggestive, yielding clear evidence of a wide linear conductive anomaly extending from the location of the proposed road toward the monumental seventh century BC Cuccumella Tumulus (seen in blue in **fig. 3**). We hypothesized that the conductive anomaly was caused by a linear depression or cut into bedrock that had been filled with mixed earth and stone, which held more water than the bedrock and therefore conducted electrical current more easily. These findings further solidified the presence of a funerary road flanked by multiple mortuary structures. After a period of speculation enforced by COVID, we began our ground-truthing excavations in 2022.

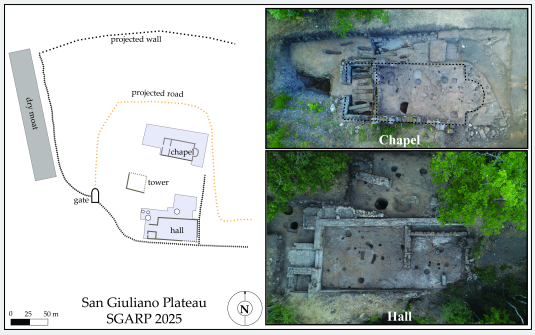

Figure 2. Above, drone photos show the areal expanse of SGARP excavations, focused on the elite hall and the chapel and its associated graves. Below, schematic of the medieval castle excavations on the San Giuliano plateau.

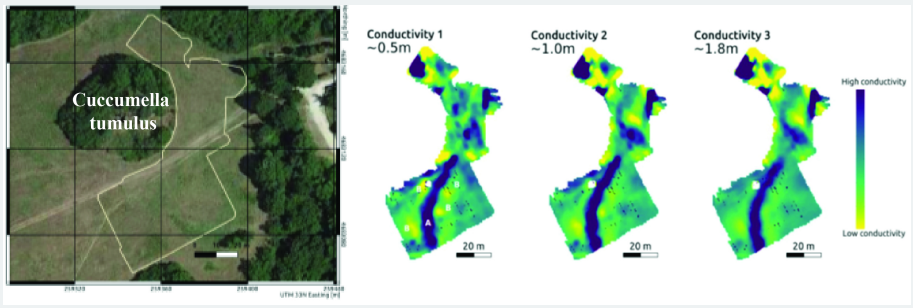

Figure 3. The ground conductivity survey on the Caiolo plateau that identified the linear anomaly leading from the edge of the plateau up to the Cuccumella Tumulus (geophysics survey by Dennis Wilken, Kiel University).

Open-area excavations in 2022 confirmed the existence of a large linear depression that followed the orientation indicated by the geophysical anomaly, connecting the plateau edge with the Cuccumella Tumulus. Excavations in 2024 subsequently revealed a previously unknown tumulus, approximately 9 m in diameter, that had been cut down into the bedrock along the plateau edge (**fig. 4**). Although it had been looted, a west-facing tomb cut into this tumulus in the late seventh century BC yielded significant finds, including a small cache of ceramic vases, bronze fibulae, and a pair of gold-plated bronze hair spirals decorated with granulation and filigree. These led us to name this the Tomb of the Golden Spirals.



Figure 4. This aerial photograph shows the looted tumulus we excavated in 2024 (Tomb of the Golden Spirals, right) and the beginning of the excavation of the dromos of the intact tomb (Tomb of the Bird Vases) within the tumulus excavated in 2025 (left). Both dromoi open facing each other across the ancient road.

In 2025 we expanded the excavation area to the west to investigate the opposing edge of the funerary road and encountered another tumulus, this one with its chamber entrance facing east. Further excavation revealed that—similar to the tumulus uncovered in 2024—the structure had been created by carving a curving channel into the bedrock around the back and supplementing the facade with cut blocks set on narrow platforms to form the characteristic rounded shape. The discovery of these two previously unknown tumuli, as well as the funerary road onto which they both open, revealed a nexus of ritual space on the edge of the Caiolo plateau, with vistas to the acropolis of the city atop the San Giuliano plateau as well as direct processional access to the large Cuccumella Tumulus at the summit of Caiolo.

There was significant excitement surrounding the discovery of the western tumulus during the 2025 season, as it afforded the greatest possibility yet of an unlooted chamber tomb. Our hopes were borne out the deeper that we excavated. The entry into the tomb was through a dromos, or entryway, that was more than 3 m deep, at the rear of which the team found—still mostly intact—a single enormous slab of stone covering the door into the chamber. Because our project had never before encountered such a stone in situ—they are typically found moved or broken by tomb looters—we first employed a scope camera to investigate the internal conditions of the tomb. This enabled us to ascertain whether any special precautions were needed before we allowed the objects within to come in contact with the air for the first time in more than two millennia (**fig. 5**). When our team removed the massive stone slab that had protected the tomb's entrance for more than 2,600 years, we found ourselves looking at the remains of four individuals laid out on beds carved of volcanic stone, surrounded by a perfectly preserved snapshot of the material remains of Etruscan funerary practices (**fig. 6**).



Figure 5. Using a camera to inspect the inside of the Tomb of the Bird Vases before excavating the chamber.



Figure 6. The first look into the Tomb of the Bird Vases. Two volcanic stone (nenfro) beds are on either side, with a bronze bowl and a handmade ceramic cup on the bed to the left (south). A cache of pottery is positioned behind the beds and atop a raised platform on the right (north).

The internal construction of the Tomb of the Bird Vases is unusual among known tombs of the San Giuliano necropolis, helping to narrow its date to the mid- to late seventh century. The ceiling, as is conventional with Etruscan chamber tombs, mimics the roof of a house. This particular tomb, however, more closely approximates the appearance of a *capanna* (hut) ceiling, which slopes in a concave line toward a groove at the central ridgeline; this stands in contrast to the more typical straight diagonal roof type with a central 'beam' seen in the vast majority of later chamber tombs at San Giuliano. Furthermore, instead of the beds for the deceased being shaped from the bedrock on either side of the door, as is typical in the necropolis, the Tomb of the Bird Vases featured regularly emplaced rectangular tuff blocks that supported separate stone beds carved of nenfro, a volcanic rock distinct from the surrounding tuff bedrock (**fig. 7**). Each of the wide stone beds had two circular headrests carved into the surface. Preliminary osteological and artifact analyses suggest the interment of an adult male–female pair on each of the nenfro beds (**fig. 8**), but further confirmation awaits osteological, isotopic, and genetic study of the remains, along with more comprehensive analysis of the conserved artifacts.



Figure 7. Photogrammetry bird's-eye view of the tomb. Image by Eos Arc.

An initial review of the objects contained within the tomb, including iron spear points, bronze ornaments, silver hair spools, beads, and objects of *pasta vitrea*, suggests the sexes of the individuals interred therein. Iron spear points, one found on either side of the tomb and positioned along the outside of each bed, are typically associated with male interments. Fibulae with long catch-plates were also arrayed around the likely male individuals, while hair spools of silver, found atop each of the beds, are typically associated with females. At the top or head of the internal side of the southern bed, probably associated with the female individual, lay another remarkable cluster of finds comprising a spindle whorl and a miniature vase of *pasta vitrea*.

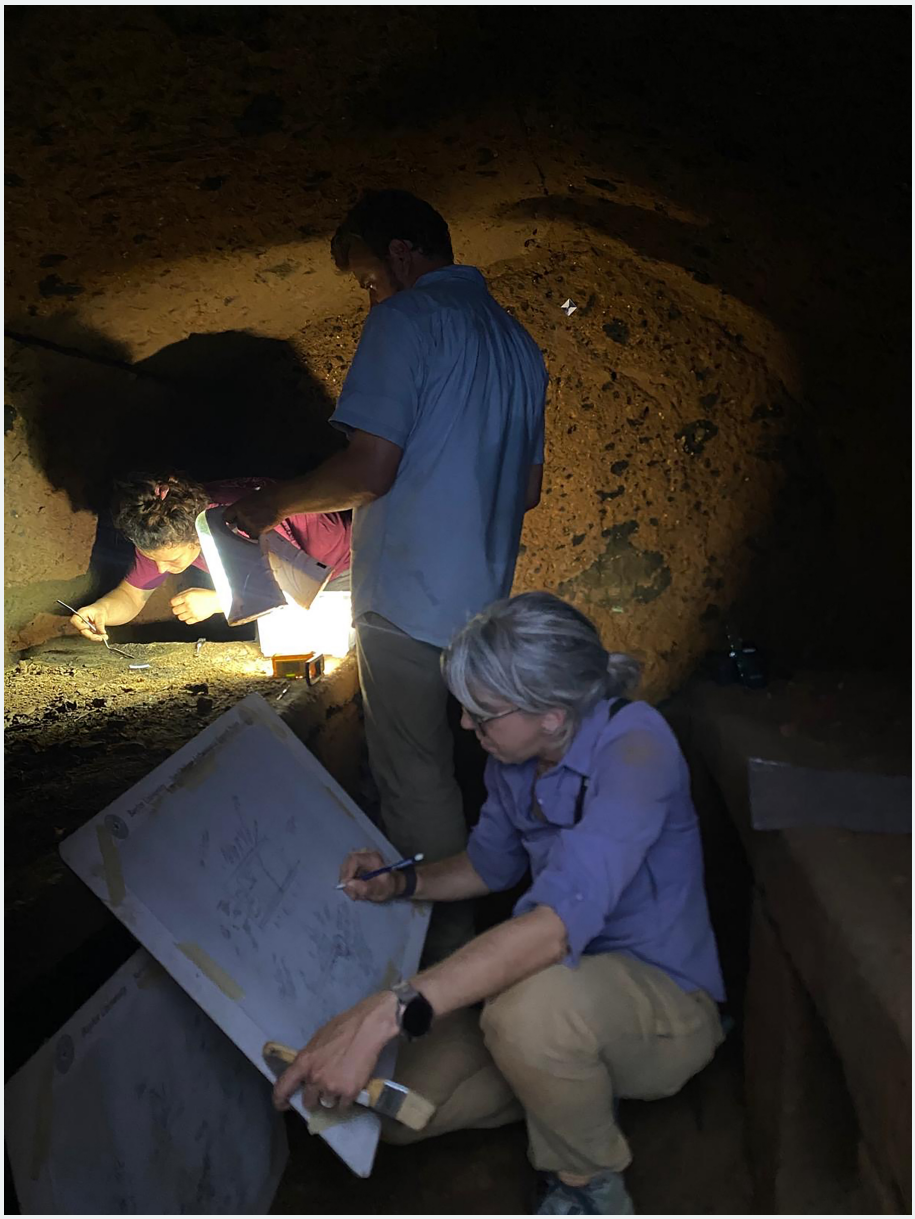

Figure 8. Documentation and conservation within the Tomb of the Bird Vases.

When the untouched tomb was opened, the ceramics were found coated with a thin layer of clay. Many had been tipped on their sides and filled to varying levels with water and clay sediment. This indicated that the tomb had been subjected to periodic flooding, which had resulted in the shift-ing of objects within it. Nonetheless, many original locations could be deduced or reconstructed through a careful process of documentation.



Figure 9. Ceramic vessels excavated from the Tomb of the Bird Vases on display in the Civic Museum of Barbarano Romano at the end of the 2025 season.

Meticulous cleaning of the tomb revealed that it contained 74 ceramic vessels, predominantly produced between the mid- and late seventh century BC (**fig. 9**). These vary in size and function; they include drink-ing and serving wares, storage jars, and specialty objects such as small *ceramica depurata thymiateria* (incense burners), as well as several plates, bowls, and chalices. Some of these plates were likely intended for suspension—either on domestic walls or within the tomb at the time of interment—as indicated by the presence of pairs of holes that would have permitted the vessels to be hung.

Of the dozens of beautifully decorated and painted ceramic vessels found within the unlooted Tomb of the Bird Vases, many are of the distinctive Etruscan-made bucchero style, which had coalesced between the earliest Etruscan period characterized by interment in *tombe a fossa* (trench tombs)—in which *bucchero* vessels were absent at San Giuliano—and the later flowering of the characteristic chamber tombs of the Archaic period. Other ceramics are of the Italo-Geometric and Etrusco-Corinthian style and were imported from southern Italy or perhaps even Greece. This tomb thus imparts direct access to Etruscan material culture from an intensely formative period in Etruscan civilization. The ceramic vessels, bronze ornaments, and ritual arrangements provide concrete evidence of how local central Italian traditions—themselves the product of centuries of complex interactions throughout and across the central and northern Italian Peninsula—incorporated ritual and cultural influences of the eastern Mediterranean.

The diversity of forms and wares suggests a deliberate selection of objects by those who furnished the tomb, reflecting a combination of personal sentiment, broader cultural values and trends, and ritualized function. A striking example comes from the southern funerary bed, where a simple hand-built and burnished brown impasto cup—pos-sibly an heirloom vessel—was found in pride of place within a bronze bowl near the head of one of the deceased (see fig. 7). By contrast, more elaborate vessels appear to have been placed on the chamber floor. These include stemmed and stemless brown impasto chalices and ribbed *kantharoi*; *bucchero oinochoai* and drinking vessels—chalices, *kantharoi*, cups, and a

kotyle—decorated with incised concentric lines, rays, and open and closed fans; and a range of Italo-Geometric and Etrusco-Corinthian wares, among them the hanging plates and a bowl, a two-handled cup, several pitchers—four *oinochoai* and an *olpe*—and seven *aryballoi*, some of which may have hung on iron hooks inserted in the western wall. In addition to multiple red impasto jars and three brown impasto carinated jars, two remarkable white-on-red amphorae decorated with birds—likely swans, associated with concepts of rebirth within the Etruscan funerary cult—were also recovered, giving rise to the tomb's name (**fig. 10**).

The tomb and its rich assemblage of artifacts offer a rare glimpse into the burial rituals of Etruscan civilization from the late seventh century BC. For instance, the assemblage of pottery, including vessels for storage, pouring, and especially for drinking, encompasses the full range of banqueting gear. This shows the importance of the banquet—both in life and death—for Etruscan society, even before the full adoption of the flashier Greek red- or black-figure wares of the sixth century. Just as the banquet was one of the most important events for social interaction and political status during life, so too was the banquet a symbol of the abundant and festive afterlife that the living wanted to provide for their beloved deceased.



Figure 10. White-on-red amphora with water birds, after which the Tomb of the Bird Vases was named.

Upcoming analyses will focus on how these vessels were used before and during the interment of the deceased and whether specific vessel groupings may represent independent offerings associated with specific individuals buried in the tomb. Although these details will be unraveled in coming years, one particularly fascinating story has emerged already. As previously noted, a large bronze bowl and a hand-fashioned heirloom cup were found on the southern funerary bed. These vessels were likely used to hold and subsequently anoint the bodies with sacred and probably perfumed liquids. The liquids were then directed down the slanted funerary bed via two carved channels, angling toward the middle in a V shape that comes to a point and culminates in a hole drilled through the slab. These channels and the hole are unusual features in Etruscan tombs and have not been previously documented elsewhere in the San Giuliano necropolis, but they were clearly meant to divert liquids from atop the bed down through the hole. This hole funneled the sacred liquid onto a distinctive plate carefully positioned just below the funerary bed (**fig. 11**). The plate itself was different from other open vessels in the tomb assemblage, in part because most other vessels in the tomb were found in pairs. With decorative floral and wave elements incised into the surface facing down when it was discovered, this singular and beautiful plate was specially selected for collecting the fluids that sanctified the dead.



Figure 11. This incised, wave-decorated brown impasto plate was found below the southern bed, positioned directly beneath a drilled hole that would have collected liquids from the funerary bed and funneled them onto the plate below.

The new tomb adds a great deal to our knowledge of the site of San Giuliano. First, we believe we have identified a previously unknown funerary road that linked the large and very early Etruscan tumulus atop the Caiolo plateau—Cuccumella Tumulus—with later sixth and fifth century BC chamber tombs cut into the cliffsides below. This road travels between the Tomb of the Bird Vases, whose doorway opens to the east, and the west-facing opening of the Tomb of the Golden Spirals, excavated in 2024. This helps us understand how the Etruscans designed their necropolis and how they moved through the sacred landscape as tomb construction, mortuary practices, and cemetery use changed over time. Second and perhaps more importantly, the intact tomb offers us an unparalleled opportunity to scientifically investigate the ritual practices and beliefs of the Etruscans in the seventh century BC, a period when the Orientalizing features of Etruscan civilization were emerging through a combination of interactions with other peoples in the Italian Peninsula and contact with the cultures of the eastern Mediterranean, especially Greece. The study of the assemblage of artifacts and the human remains has just begun, and we are excited about the potential for our investigations to shed new light on this important period (**fig. 12**).

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Figure 12. Authors, SGARP project leaders, and UCLA Archaeology/Anthropology PhD graduates from left to right: Colleen Zori, Jamie Aprile, and Davide Zori.

DAVIDE ZORI is Associate Professor of History and Archaeology in the Baylor Interdisciplinary Core, Honors College, and affiliate faculty in the Department of History at Baylor University. He received his PhD from UCLA's Interdepartmental Archaeology Program in 2010.

JAMIE D. APRILE is an independent scholar lecturing at Baylor University. She received her PhD from UCLA's Interdepartmental Archaeology Program in 2010.

COLLEEN ZORI is Senior Lecturer in the Baylor Interdisciplinary Core, Honors College, and affiliate faculty in the Department of Anthropology at Baylor University. She received her PhD in Archaeology from UCLA's Department of Anthropology in 2011.

NOTES

1. SGARP www.sgarp.org is a collaboration between an international consortium of universities led by Baylor University and Virgil Academy in Rome, under the auspices of the Soprintendenza Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la provincia di Viterbo e per l'Etruria Meridionale (Ministero della Cultura permit # DG-ABAP Serv II 28/03/2025/001931-P) and with full support of the commune of Barbarano Romano and the Parco Regionale Marturanum.