Untold Italy Episode 286: Unearthing Etruscan Tuscany - City States, Sacred Roads and Remarkable Women

Long before the Romans ruled, a mysterious civilization shaped the hills of Tuscany - and left behind clues in tombs, towns, and traditions. Join us as anthropologist Doctor Monique Skidmore takes us deep into the world of the Etruscans, revealing what their ancient sites still whisper to those who know how to listen.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy Clarke:
Ciao, buongiorno everyone. Welcome back to the show and thank you for joining us on another Italian adventure. Before we dive in, though, I wanted to do a big shout-out to one of our listeners who left such a lovely review.

Me and her travel - United States.
“Unimaginably Helpful!!!! My husband and I are accomplished travelers; we’ve been to a lot of places, having checked the box on many of the “iconic sites” in Italy. We crave learning about adventures and experiences off the beaten path that we didn’t know about, and that’s what makes this podcast so special. Consistently informative, inspiring, and fun to listen to. We have heard almost all of them and some twice! It’s a great way to educate yourself on all things Italy, from cultural dos and don’ts to logistical on-the-ground advice and hundreds of hidden gems to help you create the itinerary and trip of your dreams. Thank you, Katy!!!”

My goodness, thank you so much Me and her travel. This means everything to me and the entire team. We’re well into our 5th year of the podcast and it remains a joy to make and that’s largely due to feedback from listeners like you. So grazie, thank you for taking the time to show your support as it keeps us motivated and excited to bring more episodes to all of you Italy-loving travelers out there.

What dreams are you having about Italy lately? Over the weekend, I was craving some cacio e pepe and luckily, there is an excellent one to be had just a short walk from my house, so that scratched that itch. But I’ve also been geeking out on history - which is one of the main reasons I love to travel

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One era of Italian history I don't know much about is the Etruscan civilization and I've been trying to learn more. It's a lot harder to access information about the Etruscans - I guess it doesn't get the hype of Ancient Rome as they didn't leave behind incredible monuments like the Colosseum and their literature has all but disappeared over the centuries. But this civilization left its mark on the Italian peninsula - especially central Italy - so I've been curious to learn more.

The Etruscans especially appeal to me because women in their society held visible public roles and enjoyed more freedoms than their Greek or early Roman counterparts. They dined with men, were depicted by name in inscriptions, and even appeared prominently in art.

Recently, I caught up with my friend Dr Monique Skidmore and she suggested we have a chat about the Etruscan sites in Tuscany. Monique is an expert on anthropology who shares my love of travel and I can't wait to hear the places to visit. So andiamo, let's jump in.

Katy Clarke:
Benvenuta Monique, welcome on to the Untold Italy Podcast.

Monique Skidmore:
Thanks for having me, Katy

Katy Clarke:
Monique, I'm so thrilled to have you join me today. I've mentioned to our listeners quite a few times now how I've become interested in The Etruscan civilization. So when you suggested this podcast topic, I was so thrilled. But, you know, before we get started, can you introduce yourself to our listeners and share why you love traveling in Italy?

Monique Skidmore:
Okay. Well, my name's Monique Skidmore. I'm an anthropologist. I'm the owner of a small boutique Mediterranean tour company that focuses on archaeology and history tours. So we operate mainly in Cyprus, Malta and Greece at the moment. I've been an anthropologist for many, many years, conducted lots of field work, and I just wanted to be able to stop telling - writing and start showing. So it's really about allowing people to come through the world that I inhabit - with us, with our guides, with our archeological experts in a way that's kind of modern and is not like those old tour companies that were full of lectures and Western experts.

Monique Skidmore:
It's more about being in these countries and meeting the people who live beside the monuments that their ancestors created. So that's kind of why I do now what I do.

Katy Clarke:
Amazing. Yeah. It's so exciting to know what you're doing and not that you're doing anything in Italy just yet, but I thought it was worthwhile sharing your knowledge about this area because

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it's so interesting. And Italy is just such a - like, a lot of guides call it lasagna. Layers and layers of history. And unfortunately, we kind of tend to stop at ancient Rome. We get from medieval Renaissance, and then we go down to the ancient Romans, and then we kind of stop at ancient Rome and that most people are familiar with.

Katy Clarke:
But today, let's have a little bit of a learn about those that came before them. Tell us about the Etruscans.

Monique Skidmore:
Well, it's true that the Romans were really good at PR. So we do tend to think about the Romans. And you go to Rome for the first time, you think, oh, my God, look what they created. And what we don't realize, and we're only just starting to realize, is how much of that is actually stuff they just nicked from the Etruscans.

Katy Clarke:
Nicked is stolen.

Monique Skidmore:
Yeah, we could say plagiarized, maybe. There were lots of ideas about the Etruscans being a mysterious culture. Where did they come from? And that just means that we didn't have digital archeology, we didn't have DNA testing. We just didn't really know enough. And because so much of their culture was lost when their culture was absorbed by the Romans. So now we know that they were always indigenous to that area since at least the early Bronze Age. The late Bronze Age. They came from a proto villanova and then a vill culture and then the Etruscans. So they didn't come from the Aegean or Turkey or anywhere else, they were just there.

Monique Skidmore:
They were there around the 9th century BCE until eventually the Romans vanquished them by about 300 BCE. And during this period of time they inhabited the area from the Tigris river to the Aro River. And they were mainly in the south and west of what is now Tuscany. But they were over much of it. And they created a society that was based on mining. They were really good at mining. They became the scourge of the western Mediterranean as pirates, they were very good at training.

Monique Skidmore:
And because there was also a lot of pine forests, they became good at shipbuilding as well. They were people who are agriculturalists. They introduced the Romans to how to grow grapes and how to grow olives. And can you imagine an Italy without olive oil or wine? So they were really important agriculturalists. And because they had mines and they had farms, they needed roads. So they gave us paved roads, something I always thought the Romans had given us. They created this interesting society based on little city states. They didn't like to get together very much.

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Monique Skidmore:
Once a year they get together politically and they created these sunken roads called the Via Cava, which were between different settlements. Their society was urban city states, class based. They were governed by noble elites because they had a lot of money. So from mining and agriculture they were able to create a noble society. Eventually these nobles became part of the Roman nobles, but in the meantime they had nobles, men and women. They had then free slaves. They were sort of a working class that did all the productive stuff. They worked on mines and estates and the slaves, and then we had the slaves themselves.

Monique Skidmore:
So we had a class based society based on little city states all over Tuscany. And they had a priestly class and religion was really important, but the role of women was really different compared to the Romans or the Greeks before them.

Katy Clarke:
What I'm hearing, Monique, is that you're saying that they are the original Italians, you know, the OG Italians, if you want, if you want to talk like my children. So everything that has come after has kind of evolved from these people that lived in this area.

Monique Skidmore:
Yeah, the Romans at the time were a bunch of Italic tribes living south of what was then Rome. Rome wasn't founded. So these guys were there earlier and they had evolved all kinds of important architecture and agriculture and hydraulic engineering. They developed the arch. There wasn't much they didn't do. They're really quite important to what then became Rome. And their societies were so based around religion. They believed in lots of gods, like most people did at the time, but it was called immanent… so not imminent, but immanent polytheism, which just meant that God was in everything, the divine was in everything. You know, the grass over there. And I think Etruscan kids probably didn't grow up saying, why is the sky blue? Why is the grass green? Why? You know, why this, why that? Because I think the answer, if you're an Etruscan parent, would always have been, well, because the gods made it that way. So there just wasn't a lot of stuff you needed to ask, I think, as a kid. So they probably had much easier parenting than we do. They needed a priestly class because if the gods are in everything, you're always interacting with the gods. So they had this series of ancient texts called the Etrusca discipline, which have been lost now. But they pretty much told you exactly what to do.

Monique Skidmore:
So, you know, how should we harvest now? Should we harvest next week? You know, it's been a warm winter. And they had two kinds of priests, Haruspices, who are really good at ripping open dead animals and reading their livers, and Augurys, who are much nicer. They would hang out at the top of heights and look at the birds and stuff in the sky, like lightning. So these are the two kinds of priestly class that would tell the Etruscans how to go about what they needed to get done to be really important military invaders, pirates and agriculturalists.

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So that meant that because they were wealthy now, they thought they would be wealthy in the afterlife. And it's hard to think of a culture, maybe the Greeks, but to think of a culture that had more important beliefs about ritual in the afterlife. So when we open tombs, Etruscan tombs, which is how we know nearly anything about Etruscans, we find these incredible frescoes or friezes in bright colors and everyone is just partying.

Monique Skidmore:
It is a non stop party in an Etruscan tomb. There's dances, games, men and women, dancing, cavorting, eating. It's just party time. And these tombs are made of a soft volcanic material. So they're carved like a really important house. There are columns, windows, doorways, furniture. And if you think about going off to the wilderness for a month, you think of everything you needed to take, right? Because you can't, you know, just get to a store. And the Etruscans kind of believe the afterlife was like that.

Monique Skidmore:
They really had to just take everything they needed because they were going to be there for a very long time and apparently there aren't a lot of shops in the afterlife. So that's why we find furniture and food and mirrors and anything you can imagine inside Etruscan tombs. And that's why we know about the Etruscans, because we found their tombs and we know what they thought about in the afterlife. And that told us so much about how they actually lived their real lives and what their houses were like.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah. Amazing. Because there's not a lot of literature, is there? Because for a variety of reasons, it's all been destroyed over time. Yeah.

Monique Skidmore:
One of the few things we've got is a piece of cloth that made it to Egypt. Then because the Egyptians were really into mummification, they cut it up into strips, wrapped it around mummies, and then a Yugoslavian traveler took it to Yugoslavia.

Katy Clarke:
Wow.

Monique Skidmore:
And that's the only reason that we have those Etruscan writings. We don't have a lot left. We have some stone stele, some pillars of stone that have stuff on it. Most of the stuff we have is a bit of graffiti and just stuff on funeries saying, you know, this person died, then. It's not really enlightening stuff. Most of what we get from them, we get from the Egyptians and the Greeks and the Phoenicians telling us about what the Etruscans did and said.

Katy Clarke:
Wow. So secondhand. That's always problematic, though, isn't it? Especially if they didn't like them very much so. But they also left a lot of jewelry, didn't they? They liked their bling.

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Monique Skidmore:
In part, that's because of the status of women, too. So it was two reasons. One was because they had a whole class of people who had time on their hands to use different materials. And they've got some beautiful bronzes, particularly if you look at the Chimera of Arezzo or some of the statues that you can find in the Etruscan Museum in Volterra, you can find beautiful statuary, bronze. But it's also because women were important in the sense that later in Roman times they weren't. And in ancient Greek times they weren't. But for some reason, there's this little blip in Mediterranean history where women had their own names. They were named as well as men.

Monique Skidmore:
They were depicted in public life. They could go to banquets with men and they could own property and pass property on. And that's really odd for women at that time.

Katy Clarke:
It's pretty odd for women in history, really, unfortunately, isn't it? So let's all hail the Etruscans. What else do women do? It sounds like they're very important in that society.

Monique Skidmore:
They were respected, they were landowners, they were matriarchs. There were women like Tanaquil, Plautia, Ergonilla. These were women who were known as important women in that society. And it's hard to find other women in societies at the time that you could say were important like that. And we even have this tiny, tiny piece of Bucchero, which is indigenous Etruscan pottery from the northeast of Tuscany. It's called a birth stamp. It shows... it's just a fragment, and it shows a woman with her legs open and a baby emerging with her head and shoulders.

Monique Skidmore:
And the only reason I remembered this particular view of women, because you don't see a lot of those kinds of images in the Mediterranean at the time. It's really unusual. What I liked about it was that early archaeologists thought that she was reclining on a chair with her hand behind her back. But I reckon it must have been a female archaeologist, right? Who came along and said, look, she's actually gripping that tree there for support. And I reckon that's probably a more accurate reading of this tiny, tiny bit of fragment. But it does show you that images of women weren't just all about, oh, fertility and the nature goddess.

Monique Skidmore:
They were doing all sorts of stuff and being depicted and being allowed to have names and be represented as powerful and as not hidden away.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah, because you do get some Roman women named later on. But, like, I was just listening to a podcast about Livia, for example, on the Ancients podcast last night, but she was like the

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Empress. She was like the ultimate. So what. What you're saying is, like, women were way more integrated into society at various different levels, that they were known and respected and included.

Monique Skidmore:
Yeah. They couldn't do things like, you know, the men, they still had the judiciary sewn up, politics, but women could circulate in the daily lives. You think about a town like Volterra, a hill town like Volterra, an Etruscan town. Women were able to move around it, meet with men, go to banquets when they died, their names would be written beside the men on the tombstones and there would be statues of both of them. And there were things that were made for women. There were perhaps, possibly more interest in making things for women, more crafts for women than in periods in which most women were just at home.

Katy Clarke:
So interesting, isn't it? I wonder why that is the case. I mean, obviously, you know, I think everyone would love to know the reasons why they evolved that way when the other civilizations weren't.

Monique Skidmore:
It's hard to understand. We just don't have enough material that survives from the Etruscan period. And because we don't see that, we see lots of aspects of Etruscan society today in Tuscany. But the role of women was not accepted by the Romans and so it wasn't brought forward into the Roman society.

Katy Clarke:
They might have destroyed it, who knows. Anyway, let's not go there. So Monique, you've mentioned, a couple of places that you can go to experience and, and look further into the Etruscan civilization and they're mainly in Tuscany where the civilization evolved. So tell us more. I like. Let's maybe start with Volterra maybe because that's a lovely, it's a beautiful hilltop town, isn't it? And a lot of go there, you know, just because it's, it's gorgeous and it's got a beautiful piazza, lovely cobblestone streets and it's got a beautiful view over the Tuscan countryside. But obviously there's a lot more going on there than first meets the eye.

Monique Skidmore:
There is and when you see Volterra now, it does look like a medieval center, but its ancient name was Velathri and it was an Etruscan town that was surrounded by huge Etruscan walls that were over seven kilometers long. And when you enter today, you can go through the monumental, the Porta all Arco, which is a third century to second century BCE gate, through the Volterran walls that the Etruscans created. It was set up high for defensiveness because by this time they were understanding that the Romans down south were becoming a bit of a problem. And we saw over - from the 5th century BC from the founding of Rome through to the 3rd century, a series of wars in which slowly they got picked off because the Etruscans didn't get together and defend stuff. They just, each little city fell. And so Volterra wanted to be up high and that was one of the reasons it wanted to be up high. But the other reason it

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wanted to be up high was because like Pitigliano in the south, which we can talk about in a minute, it's a really good spot to see birds.

Monique Skidmore:
So if you're off really high, then you've got Auguries. So this priestly class can set up temples in which it can look for birds and lightning and rainbows and whatever else. So it was important for the priestly caste and it was important for defense that it was so high. the Acropolis temple foundations and all of the ancient water cisterns you can still see now as a tourist, if you go to Volterra and around the city and outside the city, there are necropolises like Portone, Marmini. And then in Tuscany, in Volterra itself is the Guarnacci Museum. And that's the best collection of Etruscan funerary architecture, really. It's got the Shadow of the Evening, which is a masterpiece of bronze. And it's got the sculpted urn of the spouses, in which you can see husband and wife depicted together as equals, you know, in beautiful. They're well wrought.

Monique Skidmore:
They're artistic images. Also. They really like funerary urns. I don't really understand the thing about funerary urns, but, gosh, they like them. Volterrans started doing them not just in terracotta, but in alabaster. And even today, as you walk around Volterra, you will see that alabaster carving that they learned from the Etruscans.

Katy Clarke:
That's amazing that it goes back that far. I mean, it makes sense, really, that it goes back that far. And it's beautiful. For those people that don't know what alabaster is, it's a beautiful white. It's quite a soft stone, isn't it? It's quite easy to carve. It's not as hard as marble.

Katy Clarke:
And if you want to get up a few souvenirs, I've got these cute little bottle stoppers. I mean, it's a beautiful place to visit Volterra. And like, I didn't even know I had an inkling about this Etruscan. Her, not so much. Keep going, Monique.

Monique Skidmore:
Well, I think it's one of my favorite hill towns because it does have that beautiful medieval core. There are fantastic croissants. There are always classic car rallies in the central square. And that's a fantastic museum. And it's only just ever so slightly off the beaten track, but it's enough off the beaten track that it's not like a San Gimignano kind of experience.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah, exactly. 100%. Yeah. You have to get in the car for about - I think it's about an hour and a half from Florence to get to Volterra. So. Yeah, you do get people that have a bit of more persistence going there, let's just say.

Monique Skidmore:
That's right. If you've looked at Volterra, the next place I'd look is down south. So it's another

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bit that's a bit off the beaten track because you have to drive a couple of hours down into Grosetta. So you're in an area which has got soft volcanic cliffs and the volcanic stuff is called Tufa. So these are the cities of the Tufa. You've got probably talked about them on your podcast. This is the best place really to have a look at how the Etruscans lived. So they're the towns of Sovana and Pitigliano and this system of roads, Etruscan roads called the Via Cava together are probably the best places to see in Tuscany, Etruscan landscapes, really.

Monique Skidmore:
Near Sorano and Pitigliano you've got this town called Sovano, which has a archaeological park called the Citta del Tufo. And it's got sacred and domestic architecture all in one and all in this beautiful park like atmosphere that you can hike around. So Pitigliano is connected to Sovano by a 20 kilometer long system of Via Cava. These are sunken roads down to about 2 meters that the Etruscans built between places. Their walls are 6 meters high at the lowest, but they're well over 20 meters high. They're very narrow. Sometimes you can only get a cart, sometimes you get a lot of people.

Monique Skidmore:
And if you still listen to things like the Visit Tuscany website or whatever, it'll say like, oh, these mysterious things, they could have been used for trade, they could have used for defenses, they could have been for ritual purposes and which really means they don't know. But if you look at these beautiful carved, mysteriously looking - and they do look mysterious because they're covered in moss and ferns now. And they've got drainage ditches because they are really big on hydrology and there are ritual carvings, markings, and there are little niches for icons. So it was clearly a ritual space. And really in the ancient world, who was going to spend that amount of people hours building something like that if it doesn't have something related to the gods at the end of it? So my view is that the Via Cava are a liminal space between the land of the living and the land of the dead. And it connected the two. So we can walk from Pitigliano, that amazing hilltop town where the Augurs were sitting up there looking at the eagles soaring over the valleys and then walk through these beautiful carved roads to the necropolises, to the cities of the tombs where they bury their dead.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah, amazing. I was going to ask you what, you know, why. Why were they sunken though, do you think?

Monique Skidmore:
I just think it was because it made them taller. It's true that it made them a much more towering effect because it was so easy to dig it out.

Katy Clarke:
Right.

Monique Skidmore:
Because it's quite soft.

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Katy Clarke:
Oh, that's so interesting. Everyone - Monique's got a lot of expertise in other civilizations, so I was. I'm very tempted to ask her whether she's seen this in other parts of the world.

Monique Skidmore:
It's important in all ritual spaces that you create a liminal space. So it's important that if you have. Even if you have, say, a menstrual heart in a jungle, you still have to create a pathway. There's always a sacred space in which you shed your current personhood and to become someone new. So going through a long, dark, narrow pathway gives you time and you go past different rituals, symbols. You might have had images of gods in those little niches. So by the time you've arrived at the other end, you're ready. You're ready for the purification rites that would have occurred outside these monumental tombs.

Monique Skidmore:
That kind of creation of a liminal space happens through music, through landscape, and in this case it was largely through landscape and through carvings, because we don't know how many of those carvings and paintings may have been lost over the years.

Katy Clarke:
And so now, today, when we have churches, when you're walking down the aisle, then that's the same kind of concept when you're going past all the paintings.

Monique Skidmore:
And that's right with - it's temple architecture, isn't it? Yeah, it's to move into any religious space. And I suppose Byzantine churches are the best example of that because they're all the same. You walk down the long pathway to get to the important stuff at the back. And the Etruscans actually built their temples different to the Greeks because they, in fact, wanted to have a big fancy opening and then a much more raised dais down at the end, where in a Greek temple, the whole thing looks the same almost. So the Etruscans were really into making an entrance, I think you could say.

Katy Clarke:
I've seen - like I mentioned, I'm a little bit obsessed with their jewelry. When I was in London earlier this year, I went and stopped at the V&A and they. I mean, I don't know where they got this Etruscan stuff from. I don't want to cast any aspersions on the British. Sorry, British. I am actually a British citizen, so I can feel like I can say this, but they did have a very nice collection of their Tuscan jewellery. And if you're over in London, you can go and see that.

Katy Clarke:
But back to, back to our sites in southern Tuscany. What else can we see around Pitigliano and was it Seretano?

Monique Skidmore:

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Sorano and Sovana is where we want to go. So Sovana is where we've got this archaeological park. So and if you pull up there, it's just a very large car park and then you walk to this enormous archaeological site which is a bunch of mega tombs and they're monumental. There's the Ildebranda tomb. The Ildebranda Tomb is a remarkable example of having a temple like facade. At the front of it there are amazing necropolises that you walk past them through the park, you go past the stone carvings, altars and just there is where the Via Cava starts. So you can then walk the pathway. It's a long way to Pitigliano.

Monique Skidmore:
But Pitigliano is such an incredible hill town. It's well worth the effort. It's just don't do it in 38 degree days in the middle of summer.

Katy Clarke:
Sounds like you've done that. So Monique, is the site. I think I already know the answer to this, but is the site well marked or is it a little bit problematic? Like would you know what you're looking at and can you get an idea or is it really advisable to go with a guide?

Monique Skidmore:
If you didn't know much about the Etruscans, you wouldn't know much. I mean I had a hard time trying to read their few little boards. You know, there hasn't been good signage really in Italy since the Romans. I don't think I have to agree with that.

Katy Clarke:
Why, why are they doing it?

Monique Skidmore:
I think with a lot of these sites it's fantastic that Italy keeps its heritage. I love that it keeps it and it allows it to exist, but it doesn't really help you much with understanding what's the end.

Katy Clarke:
I think they do in, in their Italian children get a very, very strong education in history and art history and so they do genuinely know a lot about it, but it's not presenting it to the world. And you know, there are two sites that are, if you really want an excellent experience with understanding the culture and archaeology and how it actually can come to life, is the Domus Aurea in Rome and also the Baths of Caracalla where they have done an actually excellent job with virtual reality headsets where you can actually walk through the spaces. But yeah, it sounds like might need to do a little bit of work with these Etruscan sites.

Monique Skidmore:
They do. And I think part of the problem is that we don't know. Archaeologists haven't known much about these sites. It's really. It was only a month or two ago that the first unlooted tomb, Etruscan tomb, has ever been found. And so almost everything that we know comes from looted tombs. So the Etruscans, there just hasn't been much information about them.

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And because they're not the Romans, there's not that much excitement to explain the Etruscans.

Monique Skidmore:
And it's a growing field. And hopefully these kind of southern towns will become much more interesting to people when they realize just how incredible the landscape is and what's in it.

Katy Clarke:
So are there ongoing archaeological digs there?

Monique Skidmore:
There are digs all over Tuscany. At the moment, there's only been 600 tombs found, but more are found every year. And DNA analysis is really the thing that's changing what we know about the Etruscans because most of what we knew wasn't true.

Katy Clarke:
That's what historians do, though. They need to make assumptions based on the evidence that's put forward. And then, you know, I think a lot of things are changing. I heard this really interesting podcast about Stonehenge, where they completely changed where they think the stones have come from. They thought they were coming from Wales, but they now they think they're coming from Scotland. It's incredible, the technology that we have today that can sort of illuminate what happened in the past.

Monique Skidmore:
And how people created the things they created. So quite often we had, you know, alien theories or theories of people who came across the water because we just couldn't understand how they constructed that stuff back then.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah, it's so fascinating. I could talk about this all day. So, Monique, you spend a lot of time in these places, and it's obviously the thing that lights you up. But what about these ancient places? Has it changed the way that you travel at all, or did it inspire the way that you travel? How do these two passions of yours interlink?

Monique Skidmore:
Well, I guess being an anthropologist, I'm just as interested in the lives of the dead as I am in the lives of the living. So I'm really interested in seeing the ways that things that occurred in the past can be seen in the present. And in Tuscany, the past is very much alive. But also learning what has come from the Etruscans has really changed my view of Roman society. So I didn't realize that the Romans were given the alphabet and numerals by the Etruscans. I didn't know that the toga came from the Etruscans. I didn't know the word 'person' was a word that came from the Etruscans. I didn't know that they gave us paved roads, that they developed the arch.

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Monique Skidmore:
Lots of ways in which I thought the Romans were possibly a greater innovative society than they were. So that changed how I thought about the Romans. Traveling is interesting, though, because there are lots of ways now that you can still see Etruscan culture alive in Tuscany. And so I love following that around so I can keep seeing those parts of Etruscan society today in Tuscany.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah, it's very cool. We haven't actually touched on. I know over in the east of Tuscany, in near Arezzo and Cortona, there's also Etruscan sites there, isn't there?

Monique Skidmore:
Absolutely. And up in the northeast as well. And you've got, you know, you've got a lot of Etruscan stuff in the Arezzo Archaeological Museum, which is above that lovely amphitheater. So it's not confined just to the south. It's just that we don't have as many ongoing archaeological sites being dug in Some, you know, there's still a lot to explore for the Etruscans.

Katy Clarke:
You know, I really wanted to be an archaeologist when I was a kid, and I should have done it. And actually, someone I went to school with shout out to Libby if she's listeing, she did go on to be an archaeologist. But it sounds like today, if you're really interested in this, you can actually. There's so many opportunities to pursue this field, which is amazing. I just love that for kids, you know, you think somehow that it might be, you know, finished. But I know there's always ongoing works in Pompeii and around that area as well.

Monique Skidmore:
Two things I'd say about that. The first is that many museums have got storerooms just full of stuff. Stuff that was found in an initial archaeological survey, chronicled. Look, there's this thing here, and we found this and we found that. So it's written up and there's a picture of it, and that's all that's ever done to it. There's just too much and not enough archaeologists and enough time to actually go through all that stuff. So for young archaeologists, people who want to do, you know, further work in archeology, there's enough Italian stuff to last you forever. There's also new forms of archaeology, gps, different kinds of statistical stuff. There's pretty much any kind of field you're interested in.

Monique Skidmore:
There is a method in archeology now that is opening up. So the view of methods is. And I think AI is going to be huge in how we understand the archaeology of the Etruscans.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah, amazing. I was going to ask you about that because, you know, the ability to process information and match data and images and things like that will be quite illuminating. And I also love the fact that we're getting another lens. And not to harp on about it too much, but

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like, history has definitely been informed mainly by the male consciousness. And so, you know, as you said, you noticed this picture where, you know, there's a woman obviously giving birth and in quite obviously in pain, not. Not in ecstasy, that it gives a different perspective on things.

Katy Clarke:
And we can probably learn so much more by having those different perspectives.

Monique Skidmore:
Yeah. And the other thing I love to do at Tuscany is to find the places where we can still see Etruscan life today. You know, there's a festival in Montepulciano, the Bravio dell', Botti, where people roll wine barrels up the steep steps. They divide into different city districts which are called contrade, and they go against each other, all of those kinds of things where you divide a city up into parts. So for example, during the horse racing in Siena, they divide the district up again into contrade and they compete against each other. You know, in some of these places you'll find those enormous long tables that go for kilometers where people feasts. That's the Etruscan communal feasting. All of the processions that you see that the order of the processions, the musical, the drumming, that is Etruscan.

Monique Skidmore:
You can see Etruscan stuff in every festival and celebration in Tuscany still today.

Katy Clarke:
Do they have something about flags? Because there's a lot of flag throwing going on in Tuscany.

Monique Skidmore:
The banners, the kind of banners that you have are an Etruscan thing, yeah.

Katy Clarke:
That's so interesting. I love that. And so you can also see when you visit Tuscany, there's a very - and Italy in general, actually. There's a very strong connection to the seasons. And it sounds like this is something that's endured for a very long time in, you know, going back to the priestly cast or the social stratification that they were very interested in how nature interacted with their day-to -ay life. It's amazing.

Monique Skidmore:
Yeah. And the other interesting day is November 2nd, All Souls Day. So around those necropolises, those big cemeteries, around Sovana, all of those kinds of, you know, Volterra, Tarquinia, then people come out and have picnics with the dead. So they'll feast next to the ancestors graves. And you still see that in Tuscany every all souls day.

Katy Clarke:
Amazing. I love it. It's so great. You know, if anyone has, I mean, obviously most people have

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a bit of a passing interest in history, would, you know, really love to go to Italy. But I think there's so many layers that you can uncover and just go deeper and deeper into your. Your nerd tendencies or your geek tendencies, like me. And this is what I think and what our podcast is all about, is to really go deep into your interests and really tease them out. So if you do have an interest in history, yes, go see the Colosseum and Pompeii.

Katy Clarke:
But look, there's so much more going on here that can really inspire children, adults, or anyone to go and learn some more. And I think human beings are endlessly fascinating. And we think. I always say this on this podcast as well - we think we know everything and we think we're so advanced. But it sounds to me like that we're borrowing a lot from the Etruscans.

Monique Skidmore:
We are. And it makes Tuscany such an incredible place that's not just about rolling hills and gorgeous light and wonderful cypress trees. There's so much going on in Tuscany, even though we might be there largely for the landscape. Those mines and those cemeteries and those hill towns are alive with a history that goes back to the beginning of the Bronze Age.

Katy Clarke:
Oh, goodness. Monique, thank you for sharing all of that. It's so interesting and I just want to go and find out more now. And thank you for sharing your passion. It's really great to hear from someone who's got so much deep knowledge around these civilizations and how they've evolved. And so I think if people would love to stay in touch with you, how could they do that?

Monique Skidmore:
You can Visit our website, takemetoeuropetours.com. We've got lots of contact there. You can contact me at monique@takemetoeuropetours.com. We have a Facebook page also called, handily, takemetoeuropetours. So really, just so long as you can remember Take Me to Europe Tours, you'll be able to get in touch with us and we'd love to hear from you.

Katy Clarke:
Amazing. Wonderful. Thank you so much, Monique. Grazie Mille. I can't wait to visit those Etruscan sites and even further beyond. And how lucky are we to have the time and the space to actually go and really go delve deep into this. I really appreciate you coming on board and sharing all of that with us. Thank you.

Monique Skidmore:
That was lots of fun. Thanks, Katy.

Katy Clarke:
Honestly, I could talk about history and civilizations for weeks on end. How fascinating are the Etruscans - the original Italians, if you will? And to think we are only just beginning to understand how they lived and what they believed in

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As I mentioned, I did fall in love with the Etruscan jewelry pieces I saw at the Victoria & Albert Museum earlier this year, so if anyone knows of any artisans making Etruscan jewelry-inspired pieces, let me know!

And if you'd like to learn more about Monique's archaeology-focused tours and adventures around Europe, we've of course linked to her website and social media accounts and listed the places she mentioned during this episode - you'll find them on our website at untolditaly.com/286.

As always, thanks again for listening to our podcast. Did you know it's consistently in the top 10 travel podcasts globally and has been listened to over 5 million times! And that's all thanks to you, our Italy travel-loving listeners!

Next week we're going on another wine adventure - this time in Umbria!

But until then, it's "ciao for now".

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