

‘RITORNO A VULCI’. NEW TOOLS FOR THE STUDY OF THE SOUTH-EASTERN NECROPOLISES

1. INTRODUCTION

The project ‘Ritorno a Vulci. Le necropoli orientali dagli scavi italo-francesi dell’Ottocento alle attività di tutela della seconda metà del Novecento’ aims to initiate a new season of research focused on studying specific sectors of the eastern necropolis of Vulci, starting from the investigations conducted in the 19th century by Italian and French archaeologists, up to the most recent protective measures implemented by the Superintendency in the early 1990s. The project is the result of a scientific collaboration between the Settore di Etruscologia e Antichità italiche of the Dipartimento di Scienze dell’Antichità - Sapienza Università di Roma, the École française de Rome, the Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la provincia di Viterbo e per l’Etruria meridionale, the Direzione Regionale Musei Lazio and the Department of Greece and Rome of the British Museum (CONTI, MAZET forthcoming). This project stems from the fruitful collaboration that began with the cycle of the *Chroniques vulciennes/Cronache vulcenti. Seminario sulla storia degli scavi e delle collezioni archeologiche disperse*, which took place in Rome, from February to May 2022, under the patronage of the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Etruschi ed Italici (CONTI, MAZET, MICHETTI 2023a-b).

This Seminar originated from an observation: among all the Etruscan metropolises, Vulci is perhaps the one that still suffers the most from challenges today due to the impacts of past excavations, which have profoundly conditioned the possibility of reconstructing its history and assessing its role in the broader context of pre-Roman Italy correctly. In fact, while it is true that extensive excavations in various sectors of the northern and eastern necropolises and in the urban area over the last ten years are yielding new and interesting results (CAROSI, CASI, REGOLI 2022, with references), much work remains to be done regarding the ‘old excavations’: indeed, it is necessary to ensure that many interesting data currently dispersed can be accurately and definitively georeferenced, so that further research can be conducted.

A.C., C.M., L.M.M.

2. THE SOUTH-EASTERN NECROPOLISES OF VULCI, A BRIEF HISTORY OF EXCAVATIONS AND AVAILABLE DATA

This necessity is particularly evident when considering the eastern necropolises of the ancient city. For example, a comprehensive collection

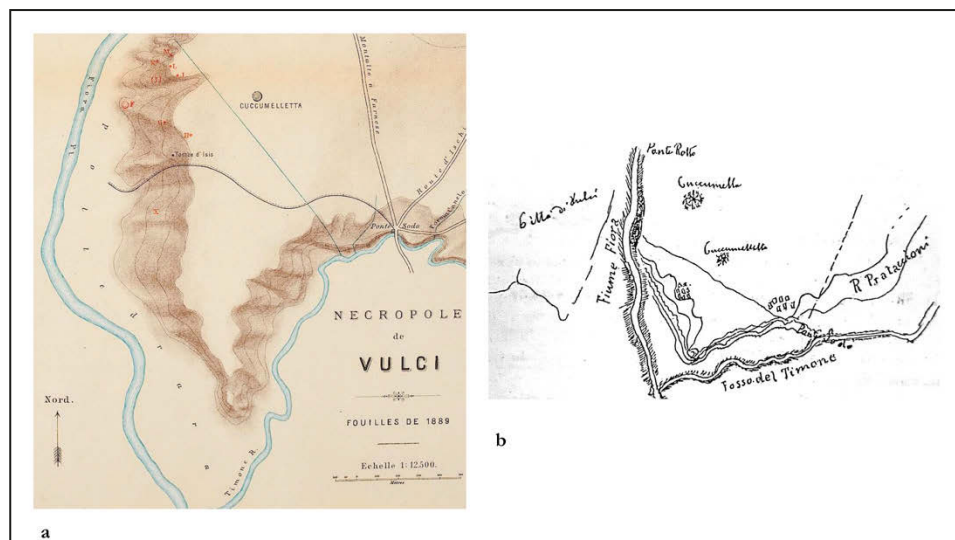


Fig. 1 – Details of the plans of Vulci by S. Gsell (a) and F. Mancinelli Scotti (b) with the Polledrara necropolis (after GSELL 1891 and MORETTI SGUBINI 2021).

of bibliographic and archival sources (such as the one compiled in the late 1980s by L. Ricciardi for the northern necropolis: RICCIARDI 1989) is still lacking. Our knowledge of the south-eastern sector of the necropolis, to which the toponyms Polledrara and Legnisina (or Agnesina) refer, remains notably incomplete. These areas were investigated during the excavations by the princes of Canino, Lucien and Alexandrine Bonaparte (1828-1854) (BURANELLI 1995), naturally conducted without the application of the methodologies employed today. Significant discoveries were made, as demonstrated by the important findings in the area known as ‘Castellina’ (BRIQUEL, MAZET, PELLETIER-HORNBY 2023, 64-73; MAZET 2023, 31-37) – SW of the Cuccumella Tumulus and the funerary monument known as ‘La Rotonda’ –, the Cuccumelletta tumulus (MORETTI SGUBINI 2015, 611-612), or extraordinary contexts such as the Tomb of Isis, still the pride of the British Museum today (BUBENHEIMER-ERHART 2010, 2012).

In the second half of the 19th century, with the authorisation of the Torlonia princes, the new landowners, surveys by F. Marcelliani (1883), S. Gsell (1889) and F. Mancinelli Scotti (1894-1895) were carried out in this area, with different methods and results. The former, in addition to some circumscribed interventions at Cuccumelletta, excavated in a sector of Polledrara that, as reported by Helbig, was located ‘close to the ancient city’ and therefore potentially located at the plateau’s edge overlooking

the Legnisina valley. Here, a nucleus of «thirty or forty ... well ... square tombs» were explored, perhaps ascribable to the end of the Early Iron age (MORETTI SGUBINI 2012, 1095 with references). Stéphane Gsell, on behalf of the École française de Rome, and financed by the Torlonia family itself, conducted scientifically grounded investigations (DELPINO 1995; HAUMESSER 2015), resulting in a monograph that is still fundamental for our current knowledge of the site (GSELL 1891).

Gsell unearthed numerous pit tombs dating back to the Early and Middle Orientalising periods, often adjacent to other, more recent, chamber-type tombs (Fig. 1a). He also identified, without exploring it, a large tumulus halfway up the hillside bordering the Legnisina valley to the East.

Mancinelli Scotti's excavations are documented through a series of letters preserved in the Central State Archive in Rome and in the Archive of the National Archaeological Museum in Florence (Fig. 1b). His research (which also involved the Ponte Sodo necropolis), focused on the eastern edge of Polledrara and, more precisely, SW of Cuccumelletta and a short distance from the tumulus previously identified by Gsell (MORETTI SGUBINI 2021). The tombs, spanning from the Early Iron Age to the Hellenistic period, were of various type (pit, trench, chamber). Some of the grave goods discovered at that time were acquired in 1896 by A.L. Frothingham, Secretary and (later) Associate Director of the American School of Classical Studies in Rome: six of these were added to the collections of the Pennsylvania University Museum in Philadelphia (DOHAN 1942), while three others to the collections of the Field Museum in Chicago (DE PUMA 1986). Recent research, however, has revealed that these were heavily altered and counterfeit (CONTI 2021).

Regarding the first half of the 20th century, archaeological literature does not record any significant finds. However, in the second half of the same century, also due to the Agrarian Reform of the Ente Maremma, the Polledrara-Legnisina area (like other Vulcian necropolises) became a target for clandestine excavators. The phenomenon results in the indiscriminate looting of numerous contexts and a huge diaspora of artifacts, resulting in an increasingly fragmented view of the necropolis topography. Only in a few cases does the Superintendency succeed in intervening, with the help of the Guardia di Finanza or Carabinieri, by recovering what remains of extremely important grave goods. In this regard, we can mention the looting, in the early 1960s, of the so-called 'Tomba del Trono della Polledrara', which reportedly yielded the famous wooden head laminated in gold now in the Civic Archaeological and Numismatic Collections in Milan (MORETTI SGUBINI 2013-2014, 172-186; CONTI 2019, 107, note 16; MAZET 2022, 170-171, fig. 10, with other references), and that of the older 'Tomba degli Ori' (Fig. 2) (MORETTI SGUBINI 2013-2014, 146-170; DAVIDDE PETRIAGGI,



Fig. 2 – The wooden head laminated in gold from Tomba del Trono della Polledrara (a) and jewellery from the Tomba degli Ori (b) (after MAZET 2022 and DAVIDDE PETRIAGGI, CAROSI 2016).

CAROSI 2016). Equally important was the recovery in 1976 of the grave known as the ‘Tomba del Guerriero’, dating back to the Early Orientalizing period (MORETTI SGUBINI 2004).

Many discoveries have been made by the Superintendency up to the present day, primarily through excavations undertaken for protection or restoration of important funerary monuments. For instances interventions between 1984 and 1987 focused on the Cuccumelletta Tumulus, while in 1987, following a flood, the so-called ‘Tomba Costruita’ on the slopes of the Polledrara was brought to light (SGUBINI MORETTI 1994, 15-28). Between 1985 and 1987, the suburban sanctuary of Fontanile di Legnisina was also excavated (MASSABÒ, RICCIARDI 1989). This brief overview highlights the extremely fragmentary nature of our knowledge regarding the south-eastern necropolis of Vulci.

We must acknowledge the lack of a great deal of topographical information that prevents the diachronic reading of the development of this sector of the ancient city’s necropolises: a deficiency regretted, moreover, even in significant works, such as those by Bruno Massabò, from the late 1970s (MASSABÒ 1979, 1985), or the more recent ones by Giorgio F. Pocabelli (Fig. 3). Nevertheless, the latter ones constitute fundamental points of reference for studying the eastern necropolis and road networks of the city and its surrounding area (POCOBELLI 2007, 2010-2011). Our project aims to bring together all existing documentation on the Polledrara and Legnisina sectors and to fill this gap in Vulci’s archaeological history.

A.C.

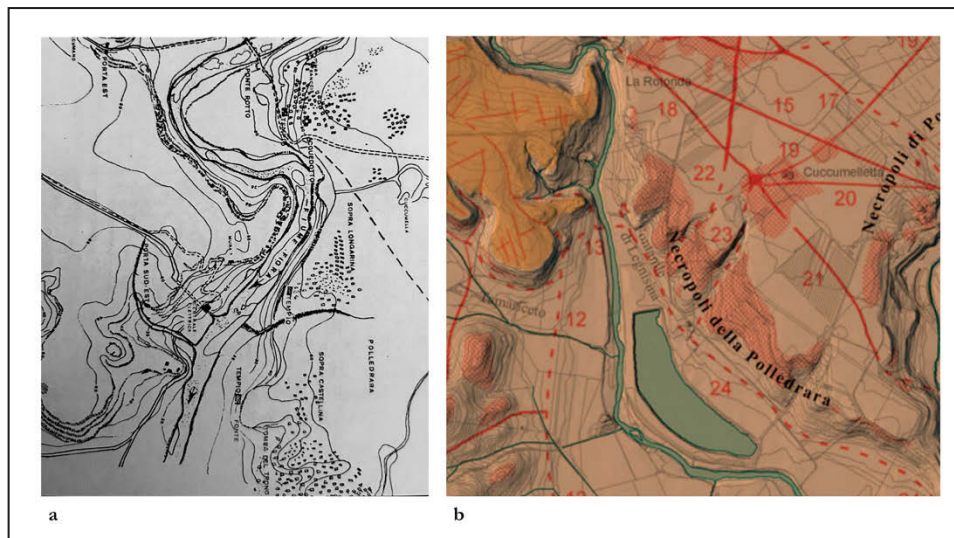


Fig. 3 – Details of the plans of Vulci by B. Massabò (a) and G.F. Pocobelli (b) with the Polledrara necropolis (after MASSABÒ 1979 and POCOBELLI 2010-2011).

3. BUILDING AND IMPLEMENTING A WEBGIS FOR 'RITORNO A VULCI': SOME PRINCIPLES

One of the main goals of the 'Ritorno a Vulci' project is the creation of a dedicated WebGIS, which will, alongside other works, generate and manage new topographical documentation of the area. Specifically, this entails the repositioning the areas excavated since the 19th century onto modern cartography. The initial step involves collecting all available scattered documentation, with the aim of bringing virtually them together. For instance, historical cadastre, in particular the Gregorian Cadaster of the area, drawn up in 1837, could be repositioned, as a series of ancient maps featuring topographic points of precise contexts, such as those published by the Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica (Fig. 4a) (KNAPP 1832; *MonInst* 1, 1829-1832, pl. 40; see also FRANCESCHINI, PASIEKA 2021, 355-357, fig. 26, Archivio DAI-Roma: D-DAI-ROM-AVII-06), or from the Bonaparte or Gsell excavations (Fig. 1a) (BONAPARTE 1829, 213; GSELL 1891, 8), or Luigi Canina's map (Fig. 4b) (CANINA 1846-1851, pl. 104), as well as the plans of the more recently excavated and published areas. While some initial work has already been carried out in this area (see *supra*), it highlights the challenges associated with repositioning old maps, even if they appear to have been created by the best cartographers of the time. The repositioning of old maps may introduce several distortions



Fig. 4 – Details of the plans of Vulci by J.M. Knapp, 1832 (a) and by L. Canina, 1837 (b) (after Archivio DAI-Roma, published in FRANCESCHINI, PASIEKA 2021 and CANINA 1846-1851).

due, for example, to different methods of measuring the field. Despite being a real challenge, this is not a hopeless task: the effort required for the even partially reposition of the excavated areas and singular points that appear on the maps, proves very useful in the quest to identify the excavated areas, reconstruct the funeral landscape and subsequently return to the field with new technologies.

This dedicated WebGIS is intended to become a collaborative digital research platform, accessible online but with varying levels of accessibility, with open-source information, while more developed data available with restricted access to approved researchers upon request, considering heritage protection requirements. Indeed, for a site like Vulci, which has been and is still heavily affected by clandestine excavations, providing access to very precise topographical information, such as grave locations, is not without risk.

When creating the platform, we have to think about the different levels of data reading and transmission. A potential model is the WebGIS of the Amathus excavations in Cyprus, developed by the École française d'Athènes¹, which is entirely open source and can be consulted through a simple web browser, without having to resort to proprietary software. Moreover, it is

¹ <https://sig-amathonte.efa.gr/>.

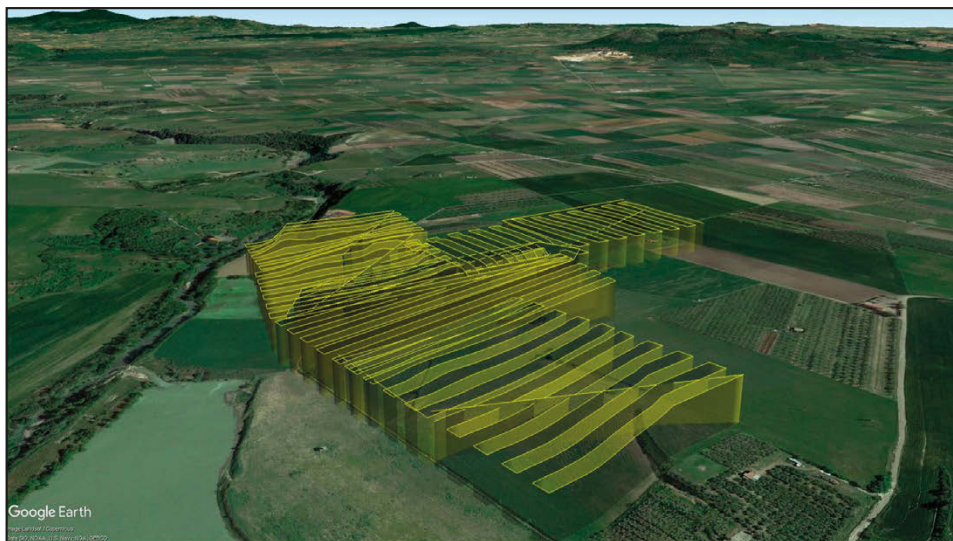


Fig. 5 – View of the drone survey (EFR, L. Fornaciari).



Fig. 6 – Screenshot of the GIS platform for the study of the funerary landscape of the eastern necropolis of Vulci (EFR, L. Fornaciari).

very user-friendly, which is crucial for involving researchers with different digital skills and abilities in these projects, or when one also wants to reach a non-specialist audience. The platform will address a dual purpose: on the one hand, to make the work carried out accessible in various forms (offering

partial access to databases of general interest for the public and restricted access to research data for specialists), and, on the other hand, to enable the preservation and archiving of the digital version of GIS-associated archives, thus facilitating documents consultation and access, and ultimately contributing to their preservation (CANNAVÒ, FADIN 2016). This is particularly significant for a site like Vulci, where scattered objects and documentation spanning several centuries need preservation.

In October and November 2023, a first GPS reconnaissance and drone survey mission covered an important part of the eastern necropolis, focusing especially on poorly investigated areas with high potential thanks to an initial site survey and a review of available cartographic and archival data². The 40-hectare area investigation includes a large part of the area of the Polledrara necropolis, in particular some of the areas covered by Bonaparte and Gsell excavations, as well as an unexplored section of the Cuccumelletta tumulus (Figs. 5, 6). These choices are, of course, also based on all the preceding topographical work in the area, but which also needs to be integrated and updated. This first mission has provided significant data for further geophysical investigations in search of topographical anomalies that will help to identify the most significant areas for a resumption of excavations.

To this harvest of both old and new data, and thanks to the collaboration with the Direzione Regionale Musei Lazio, we aim to incorporate into the project an unprecedented and systematic review of the nuclei of materials stored in the deposits of the Museo Nazionale di Vulci at the Castello della Badia, which are mostly the result of recoveries made between the 1950s and the 1990s following clandestine excavations by the Soprintendenza and the law enforcement agencies. Often, these material groups are accompanied by delivery reports indicating the landowner where the clandestine excavation took place. Consequently a cadastral search can be employed to topographically located various groups of finds, thereby contributing to the reconstruction of the chronological excursus of the sectors of the eastern burial grounds chosen as samples.

These still scattered elements need to be brought together through a new campaign of topographical studies, work within the storerooms of the Castello della Badia and a new excavation, but also by trying, when possible, to recontextualise the material from Vulcian grave goods and burial assemblages scattered around the world. This is another dimension of our project, which envisages an implementation of the WebGIS of the necropolises to enable data visualization on the platform or in interrelation with the platform.

C.M.

² The topographic work of the mission is undertaken under the responsibility of Lorenzo Fornaciari, topographer-geomatichian of the Service archéologique of the École française de Rome.

4. THE 'VULCI NEL MONDO' PROJECT'S CONTRIBUTION

At a later stage, we will incorporate a feature into the WebGIS to display the funerary material and grave goods of Vulci that have been dispersed. We are not starting from scratch, as research programs in France and Italy already possess inter-relational databases accessible in open access that can be implemented, particularly focusing on the dispersal of Vulci material. One noteworthy example is the French programme *Répertoire des ventes d'antiques en France au XIXe siècle* (RVA)³, developed by colleagues at the Institut national d'histoire de l'art and the Louvre, which focuses on the dispersion of archaeological material in 19th-century Parisian auction sales. Another significant digital project is 'Vulci nel Mondo' (VNM)⁴, initiated and funded by a private individual, with the patronage and scientific supervision of the Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità della Sapienza. This is a virtuous example of collaboration between a private individual and the academia in the name of sharing the value of our archaeological heritage and the need to protect and enhance it to the best of our ability, in agreement with all the stakeholders in charge of this purpose, while at the same time aiming to train new generations of researchers. While on the one hand the VNM database utilizes a simple and straightforward indexing system, adopting the nomenclatures in use in most sector catalogues, on the other hand it aims to integrate the strictly personal and descriptive information with that referring, where available, to the various ownership transfers and acquisition events that characterise the antiquarian history of most objects from Vulci (BONADIES *et al.* 2023).

The catalogue of all artifacts with provenance from Vulci that is either ascertained or at least declared in museum inventories enables the restoration of unity to grave goods that have been dismembered across various museums and allows an overall view of them. For instance, the virtual visitor can not only admire in its entirety the grave good from 'Tomb 5', excavated by Francesco Mancinelli Scotti in one of Vulci's eastern necropolises in 1895, but can also trace its long journey from its discovery to the Penn Museum in Philadelphia in 1896, along with other grave goods uncovered in the same excavation campaign (Fig. 7) (CONTI 2021, 420-421, fig. 6).

VNM is also conceived as a Virtual Museum, serving as an online space to bring together a permanent collection on Vulci, a highly versatile tool with features complementary to its tangible counterpart. The standard

³ <http://www.purl.org/inha/agorha/001/47>.

⁴ <https://vulcinelmondo.com/>.

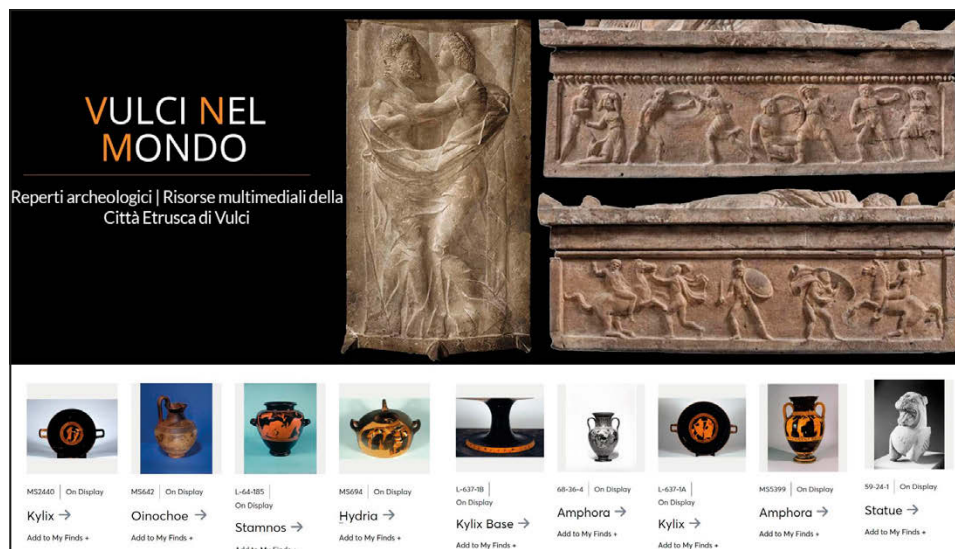


Fig. 7 – Screenshot of the website VNM, with a sample of the Penn Museum’s finds from Vulci.

virtual tour model is built on two key aspects: navigation, providing access to the collections and other information on the museum’s website, and interaction, simulating a physical space with which visitors can engage.

The first objective is to collect the dispersed heritage into a single place, to make use of the cards in the database and to engage different types of users, including children, in the discovery of the history of Vulci. The museum includes an outdoor area providing an introduction to Vulci’s history, and an indoor area, featuring a selection of artifacts, arranged chronologically and supplemented with thematic insights. Visitors can navigate freely within this space, but can also choose the ‘guided tour’ mode, which allows them to follow a predefined route. In addition, it is possible to engage in online chats with other visitors, creating further possibilities for interaction.

Future developments for the virtual museum include expanding in-depth exhibitions (hence the choice of the term ‘virtual museums’), incorporating different languages, and experimenting with new engagement formats, also for younger age groups. In addition, a partnership with Google Arts and Culture is being applied for, which will enable the creation of additional multimedia content on Vulci. Entering the Metaverse will offer even more opportunities for interaction and customisation of virtual spaces.

It remains to be said that we conceived VNM as an enterprise intended to involve PhD students and postgraduates in Etruscology, a laboratory where young archaeologists have the opportunity to tackle the work of consulting online and printed catalogues from museums worldwide; to carry out bibliographical and archival research; to reconstruct the antiquarian and collecting history of the various complexes dismembered over time; to deal with the different systems of documenting artefacts and acquire the necessary skills to draw up new records according to the parameters set for VNM, but above all to acquire a special sensitivity towards the theme of dispersed and scattered heritage and the importance of reassembling and at least virtually returning it to the community.

The ever-increasing awareness and willingness, which we are experiencing with regard to Vulci, among managers and curators of foreign museum institutions to collaborate on this front, leads us to a cautiously optimistic attitude towards initiatives such as this one, which may be of interest for other great Etruscan cities, all of which have been more or less affected by similar diasporas and in need of similar recovery and recontextualisation operations.

In conclusion, we hope that all of these lines of research and action – in the archives, in the field and on virtual realm – will give the newly-established 'Ritorno a Vulci' project the opportunity to present the community with an unprecedented and up-to-date overview of the Vulci funerary landscape.

L.M.M.

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ABSTRACT

The project 'Ritorno a Vulci' focuses on specific sectors of the south-eastern necropolis of Vulci, where excavations have been conducted since the 1800s. One of the primary objectives of this project is to create a dedicated WebGIS that will generate and manage new topographical documentation of the area. This will serve as a collaborative digital research platform, making document consultation more accessible and contributing to their preservation. Another significant digital project is 'Vulci nel Mondo' (VNM), which is conceived as a

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Virtual Museum. The Authors illustrate this highly versatile tool as an online space to bring together a permanent collection on Vulci. The standard virtual tour model is built on two key aspects: navigation, providing access to the collections and other information on the museum's website, and interaction, simulating a physical space with which visitors can engage.