

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND UNDERGROUND CIOCIARIA

A journey between surface and underground in search of the traces of history and the wonders of nature

Among its natural and artistic beauties, Ciociaria boasts a merit which very few know: that of being one of the first inhabited Italic lands.

The evidence of this are the remains of what is called the "Homo of Ceprano", the most ancient Homo Erectus found in Europe, one of our ancestors that lived here some 800-900,000 years ago.

The town of Ceprano stands in a place which is significant for the reconstruction of the history of Italy in pre-Roman and Roman ages.

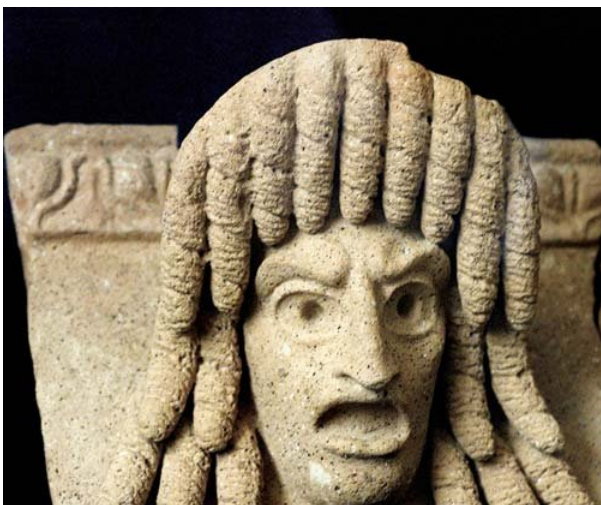


Archeologic area of Fregellae

Its position, on a Liri's bend, along the Via Latina, was important both strategically and commercially. It was not by chance that there was Fregellae nearby, an important Roman colony destroyed by the Roman themselves in 125 B.C. when it rebelled against them.

After the loss of Fregellae, in the place where today the modern Ceprano stands, they built Fregellanum, whose remains of the Imperial age have been recently found.

As evidence of an even earlier past, there are the rests of the Elephants Meridionalis et Antiquus, discovered in the neighbourhood of Pofi, which dates back to 400,000 years ago. Two tusks and a molar tooth of the great elephant are displayed in the Prehistoric Museum of Pofi where there are also on show other remains of the "Homo Erectus" and many Palaeolithic findings unearthed in the area.



Ceprano archaeological Museum: theatre mask

These important archaeological discoveries allow us to follow step by step along centuries and years the events, the succession of peoples, masters and losers. In pre-Roman times southern Latium was in the hands of the Ernici and the Volscians, Italic peoples who after many fights and battles were later Romanized.

A very important Volscian settlement was also Castro dei Volsci, as proven by its name. It was the Volscian village of Castriminium protected by a fortress and by

megalithic walls which were destroyed by the Romans, although there are some traces left.

Not far from the town centre, in a place called Casale di Madonna del Piano it is possible to see an interesting archaeological complex which tells about ten centuries of life in this area.

The excavations have brought to light the ruins of a Roman villa of the first century B.C., a Republican thermal complex and a necropolis dating back to the sixth-seventh century A.C. But within this territory there are treasures which have not been made by the hands of men.

The most enchanting and majestic ones are the Caves of Pastena, one of the most important speleological complexes in Italy, whose discovery and exploration dates back to 1926. It is made of two parallel branches, one superior and one inferior, crossed by the underground waters of the karst basins of Pastena. The waters come in by the Fosso Maestro and after a long journey throughout the caves they flow out again in the Sacco Valley.

The passage of the waters creates small underground ponds and rivers which can be crossed by small boats. Moreover, along its journey the waters have shaped large underground halls, galleries, vaults and passages filled with stalactites and stalagmites which create a fairy-tale landscape.

Further north, near Colleparado, the underground reveals other magic settings. The Cave of Regina Margherita at Colleparado is born from the bottom of a gorge formed by the stream Rio in one of the most natural, wild and unspoiled landscapes of Ciociaria.

Here among woods, rocks and majestic views you enter a 180-metres-long cave with large halls, which are also full of stalactites and stalagmites. And the surrounding woods and forests give their fruits for the joy of gourmets. In this corner of Ciociaria, black and white truffles and pore mushrooms of high quality add an extra touch to the already excellent fresh-made pastas.

Finally, you must not miss the juicy wood berries, especially the wild strawberries out of which people make a typical liqueur.

## Castro Dei Vosci - Ceprano - Pofi

The triumph of the Middle Ages in Ciociarian villages: when bare stone becomes art



Castro dei Volsci: medieval tower

Castro dei Volsci is the real representation of how popular wisdom imagines a true, authentic medieval hamlet.

Striking is its position on a perfectly round hill overlooking the surrounding valley; stunning is the shape of the old town centre, curled up and winding on top of the rise; noteworthy are the ruins of the ancient Fortress with the imposing ramparts and large round towers.

Where once run the Via Latina, on the ruins of ancient Fregellae, Ceprano rises today with a very interesting archaeological Museum.



Ceprano: cloister of S. Antonio Abate

In the old town centre, lovely preserved, the church of S. Antonio Abate stands out with its annexed monastery, a small medieval jewel, later modified many times.

Pofi, too, holds many historical treasures: within its territory, the remains of the Homo Herectus, dating back to 400,000 years ago, have been dug and can be now admired in the town archaeological museum.

Its old town centre with the impressive square tower of the Baronial Palace rises on top of a hill.

Outside the built-up area, the little church of S. Antonino keeps a splendid, fifteenth-century fresco depicting the Last Judgement, painted by Latium-Umbrian masters.

## Natural wanderings between the horrid and the marvellous: The Well of Antullo and the Collepardo Caves



Collepardo: the Cave of Regina Margherita

Heading towards Collepardo one guesses immediately that in this corner nature has been really generous.

The beautiful valley of the Cosa breaks the natural quietness which characterizes the Ciociarian landscape and leads the visitor who is crossing it towards a wild and rocky universe.

And across gorges, ravines, unspoiled woods there is hidden a large cave, the Cave of Regina Margherita, known also as the Cave of Bambocci.

Going down the gorge of the wild stream Rio, amid threatening but splendid high walls there is the entrance to the cave. This leads to large rooms which penetrate in the bowels of the earth for at least 180 m with vaults and walls covered with stalactites and stalagmites.



The Well of Antullo

Another example of natural majesty is the Well of Antullo. This is a large chasm, 60 m tall, which created a vast cave after the collapsing of its vault.

The view is spectacular: here the deep cavern that pierces the rocky wall, above and everywhere dense vegetation and at the horizon the chain of the Ernici Mountains.

## The wonders of the underground A journey to the centre of the earth

Gently stretching on a rolling hill between two verdant rises, Pastena shines in all its rural splendour. This little town is prettily enclosed by a medieval circle of walls interrupted by 15 square towers which made it a fortified impregnable village.

The town centre has kept the allure of a medieval hamlet with its cobbled alleys, ancient portals, stairways and little squares.



Pastena caves

Yet Pastena hides a secret, a parallel underground world which offers a wealth of natural treasures. Outside its built-up area, just 5 km away there is the majestic entry to the Pastena Caves.

This complex is made of two main branches: the active one stretches for more than 2 km, the fossil one is 880m long.

The major branch is run by a river which is partially navigable with small boats.

This is an extraordinary complex with exceptional settings: large rocky halls, small ponds, huge stalagmites and stalactites, bats hanging from the vaults, narrow tunnels which seem to lead to the centre of the earth, on the trail of Verne.