

Permanent exhibition of the “Biga” of Monteleone di Spoleto

of Stefano Vannozzi

The jewel of Monteleone is the "Etruscan Biga", an ancient parade chariot in walnut fully covered with gilded bronze plates decorated with embossed application of ivory plaques. It consists of three parapets, that in the middle is higher than the other two elegant ones which are decorated with mythological scenes depicting scenes from the life of Achilles: Thetis handing over weapons to the son; Achilles and Memnon who fight on Antilochos corpse; apotheosis of Achilles. The dating of the wagon is probably around the mid-sixth century BC, due to its style and to the numerous gravestone, including among others, two Attic kylikes with mini figurations with black figures, dating back to the years around 560-550. For decades it has been debated on its origin and on the assumption of Etruscan origin, but thanks to recent and more detailed studies it is possible, with greater certainty, to attribute the work of chiselling and bronze decoration to a Greek-Ionic artist immigrated to Etruria. In fact, as far as it concerns the style, the figures belong to that culture that we find also in related products (Loeb tripods, Castel S. Mariano bronzes) in which the ionic experience joins indigenous Etruscan features. The precious archaeological work is discovered by chance in 1902 by Isidoro Vannozzi in a necropolis a few kilometers from the village, in Colle del Capitano, where there is a magnificent tumulus tomb. In this village there is an important necropolis belonging to the period of transition between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, composed of at least by forty-four cremation tombs, cylindrical wells of different sizes with cylindrical, globular and biconical ossuaries. The prestigious chariot is now preserved in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which buy it in 1903 from a antiquities trafficker, who managed to steal it and bring it across the border. This precious find has been at the center of fierce battles between New York museum and the municipal authority of Monteleone, which has been asking for its return from several time. In Monteleone, below the monumental complex of St. Francis, there is a good-size replica made by the art school of the master Manzù and made in occasion of the celebrations of the Etruscans in 1985. The permanent exhibition of the chariot allows through information panels to know not only the product, but also the historical and archaeological context of the discovery. In two rooms are, in fact, documented either the finding and the events of the daring theft, or the findings of the burial chamber. The wealth and the attendance of Monteleone di Spoleto territory is finally attested by an archaeological map with prehistoric, proto-historic and Roman Republic sites.