

A Walking Guide to the Architecture of Civita di Bagnoregio ITALY



This walking guide to Civita and artwork were created by The Civita Institute's 2014 Astra Zarina fellowship recipient Stephanie Bower of Seattle, WA USA. For more images of this project, go to www.stephaniebower.com

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The Civita Institute/NIAUSI is a non-profit organization based in Seattle, WA USA whose mission focuses on inspiring and promoting design excellence through education and cultural exchange between the United States and Italy. The Civita Institute operates a residency facility for Fellows and members in this ancient hill town.

For more information please go to www.CivitaInstitute.org

Over 2500 years ago, Civita di Bagnoregio was an important, thriving town sitting atop a simple rock outcropping surrounded by fields. Instead of steep cliffs, roads connected to other towns in all directions.

Over time, the soft soil around Civita has eroded or fallen into the valley below. You can see evidence of the layers--the deposit of volcanic *tuffo* stone of which the town is built over the crumbly fossil-filled oceanic sand and gray clay, most evident in the *calanchi* ridges to the east. The rivers to the north and south, together with a history of earthquakes and landslides, have left the town isolated and surrounded by deep valleys... *an island in the clouds*.

What you see today in Civita has been built and rebuilt over the centuries, so it's challenging to determine exactly when buildings were constructed. The original settlement is probably pre-Etruscan, becoming a thriving Etruscan town around 700-300BC, then a Roman settlement 300BC-300AD. Some experts believe Civita became a Christian town as early as 69AD.

Most of the buildings standing now were originally constructed during the Middle Ages 300-1100AD, with the current church structure and bell tower likely built around 600AD. Medieval Civita was probably a walled city dotted with towers, most fallen or taken down due to earthquake risk. The thick wall bases of the towers are still evident in plan.

In 1140, Civita became a free commune, leading to an era of prosperity. Renaissance Civita in the 1500's saw a period of wealth and prestige when several *palazzi* or palaces were built by noble families along the town's main street.

In 1695, a series of catastrophic earthquakes destroyed much of Civita, resulting in a steady decline in population and importance ever since. The seat of government and cathedral were moved to Bagnoregio. By WWII, many of the buildings were in ruins.

Slowly being rebuilt since the 1960's when it was inhabited by around 80 local farmers and their families, Civita is finally seeing a very recent resurgence. There are currently around 9 year-round residents, 4 of them original *Civitonici*. Other houses and gardens are owned and occupied as weekend and summer residences.

Wander the town's streets and learn about its amazing history, support its shops and cafes, discover Civita's breathtaking views and ancient treasures...

Porta Santa Maria,
the entrance to Civita.



How to pronounce the name like a local?
It's SHEE-vee-tah dee Bahnyo-rehj-oh



Thanks to the late Professor
Astra Zarina and her
University of Washington
students for their research.

1 Ponte or bridge to Civita, the current structure was built in 1965. A masonry bridge built in 1926 was damaged in WWII, and before that was a land bridge. Until 20-30 years ago, donkeys were the primary means of transport. Look for the stone rings or *annelle* and benches around town, used to tie up and mount the donkeys.

2 Ruins of **Palazzo Janni**, once the home of an ancient, illustrious family including Saint Bernardo Janni 700AD.

3 Via Civi, the only bit of street that remains of what was once the Bridge Quarter. Here stood Santa Vittoria Church, a monastery, hospital and orphanage. This road once lead down to the town's chestnut groves below.

4 Porta Santa Maria, nearly 3000 years old, this was the portal to the ancient acropolis. The original gate is just inside, the two interior arches with little or no mortar and the carved passageway are ancient Etruscan.

In the 1550's Renaissance, the entrance facade was renovated and long bench added using stone from the church. This work was comissioned by British Cardinal-Governor Pole, his eagle emblem sits atop the facade's medieval-style arch. The two lions grasping human heads served as a reminder of a successful battle against despotic families. The stone eagle and lions are believed to be medieval, relocated to this facade in the Renaissance.

The gate is named for the chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary that was once on the upper floor until the 1500's when it became part of the Colesanti residence.

Civita at one time had at least four gates into town, only this one still stands. Look for the hinges where doors once closed the gate and the crosses carved into the stone walls by Christian pilgrims.

5 Ancient **Guard House** carved into the stone, later a stable, now a small shop.

6 Via Santa Maria della Porta, Civita's main street once connected to other towns and dates back around 3000 years to the pre-Etruscans.

Etruscan town layout was based on a circle with a major east/west *Decumanus* and north/south *Cardo* roads. Where they intersected was the *forum*, now the Piazza San Donato and the town meeting place for 3 millenia. Past the town square, the street name changes to Via della Provvidenza or Via Porta della Maestà.



7 Piazza San Pietro (Colesanti) was once a thriving marketplace just inside the main gate, called by locals "Piazza Colesanti" for Civita's oldest noble family who built a *palazzo* here.

In the 1500's Renaissance, wealthy families built palaces or *palazzi* around this square and along the main street, Via della Maestà. Taller and larger in scale than the medieval houses, look for the curved projecting cornice at the roof, the gray locally-quarried basaltina stone frames around the windows, and the remnants of stucco that once covered their exterior stone walls.

Around **Piazza San Pietro (Colesanti)**:

8 Palazzo Colesanti. Note the openings to the sky where a complete palazzo once stood. Find the Colesanti family coat of arms with two spears and three stars.

9 Palazzo Cristofori, built in the 1500's Renaissance.

10 Stone ruins of a former grand house owned by the church, now housing the communal **Lavanderia** or clothes washing sinks dating to after WWII when water was finally piped into the town. Public toilets are here too.

11 Porta Maestà, once a tower noted by its thick, square base, belonged to the Bocca family. This is where the *Carcere* or prison district of Civita began, the locations of an ancient convent of the Clarissa and Church of Santa Clara, now lost.

12 This area was also part of **Piazza San Pietro**, named for the small St. Peter's Church that once stood here, destroyed in the 1695 earthquakes.

Left to Right: Piazza San Pietro, Palazzo Cristofori, Palazzo Colesanti, Porta Santa Maria, shop with *profferlo* stairs

13 Plaque noting the location of what was the **House of San Bonaventura**, Civita's most famous son. It collapsed into the valley during the 1695 earthquakes and landslides.

The son of a doctor, Bonaventura was born Giovanni Fidanza in 1217. Legend says that as a child, he was miraculously healed from illness when his mother prayed to St. Francis in the cave that can still be found just below the Belvedere across the bridge in Mercatello. From then on, he was called *Bonaventura* or "Good Fortune".

Bonaventura entered the Franciscan monastery in Mercatello at the base of the Civita bridge (lost in landslides) and later studied and taught in France at the Sorbonne where he became friends with Thomas Aquinas.

Bonaventura was a well-known and important figure in the Catholic church, considered the second founder of the Franciscan Order and is still honored today as the Patron Saint of Bagnoregio. He was also mentioned in Dante's Divine Comedy, Canto XII del Paradiso.

14 Via San Bonaventura, may be what is left of the Etruscan *Cardo*, or north-south road. Note the arched remnants of a house.

Around the **Piazza San Donato**:

15 Palazzo Arcangeli was built during the Renaissance. The long bench outside is constructed from the ogee molding removed when the cathedral was renovated in the 1500's. It's the same stone detailing as a band on the bell tower. Note the family name inscribed in Latin over the windows. Monsignor Nicola Arcangeli (1476-1541) served six popes.

16 Palazzo Mazzocchi-Alemanni was built in the 1550's and is the largest *palazzo* in Civita. Note the name of the family carved in Latin into the stone atop the windows. Its grand spaces now house the **Museo Geologico or Geology Museum** and the town bar or *enoteca*. Inside the *enoteca* is a nice example of a typical basaltina stone fireplace. At the corner cafe, find a large **oven** used for communal baking, one of several in town. Visit the **Etruscan cave** in the ground floor shop.

17 Medieval Butcher Shop, was once the base of a tower. Fish were sold on the stone slab outside the door, look for the fragment of an ancient granite column underneath.

18 Palazzo Comunale, the former municipal building, was a private residence purchased in 1448 to be the seat of local government. After the 1695 earthquakes, the government seat was moved to Bagnoregio. Note the papal coat of arms over the door with the date 1455, also the *profferlo*, an outside staircase typical of medieval houses in the Viterbo region.



19 Forno di Agnese restaurant named for the large private **oven** once here, used communally.

20 Former **Priest's House**, the slanted base was added here and in other locations in town in the 1950's.

21 Extensive **cliff stabilization** work is being done in this area, information is on display at the **Geology Museum**.
<http://www.museogeologicodellefrane.it/en/civita-di-bagnoregio.html>

22 Former **Law Courts & Medieval Jail** below, note the iron bars on the window.

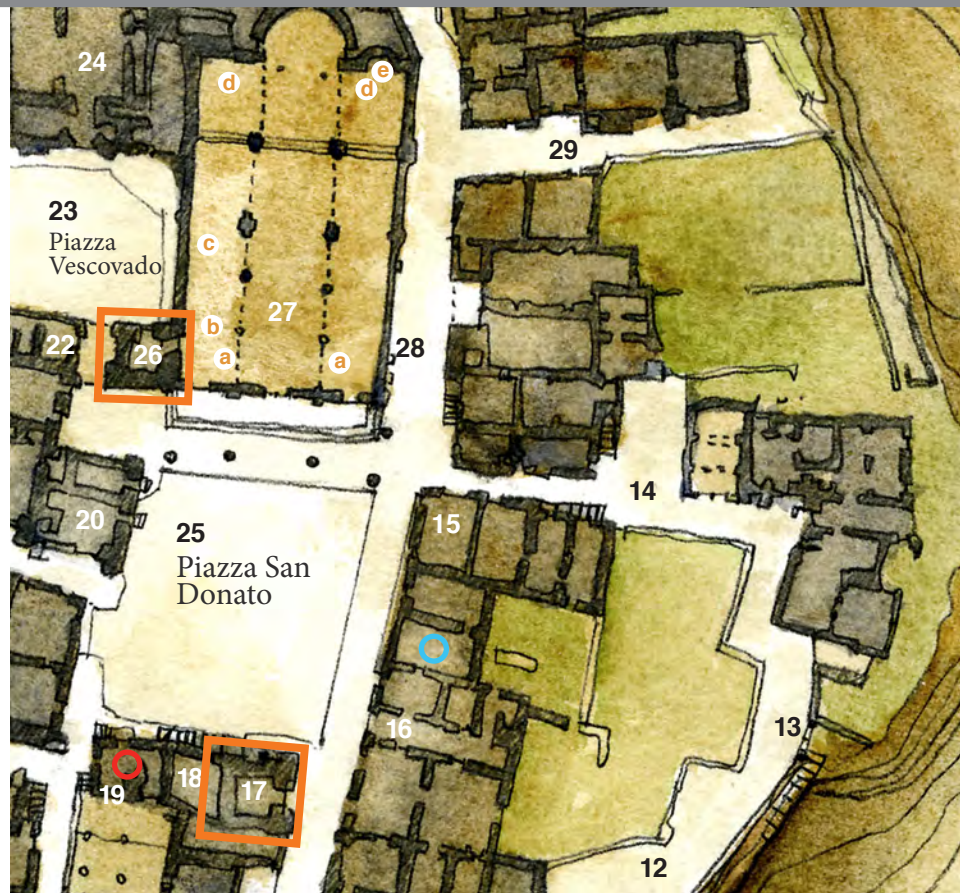
23 **Piazza del Vescovado** (formerly Piazza Episcopio) were church gardens and cemetery, together with the **24** former **Bishop's House** until 1699, now a private home and vast garden.

It is believed that Longobardi King Desidero, healed by bathing in local waters, renamed the area of Roda to "Balneum Regis" or "royal baths," now "Bagnoregio."

25 **Piazza San Donato** has been the primary meeting place and symbolic town center for nearly 3000 years. Once an Etruscan then Roman forum, it is located at the auspicious intersection of important Etruscan roads, the east-west *Decamanus* and the north-south *Cardo*. As part of the Etruscan religion, there was once a well in the piazza that connected the living city with the city of the afterlife.

The remnants of columns in front of the *chiesa* were probably once part of a Roman temple, made of granite likely brought from Egypt.

Twice a year, the traditional *Tonna* or donkey race is held in the town square on the first Sunday in June and in mid-September.



26 **Campanile**, or Bell Tower, is Romanesque, probably built around 600-700AD. Bells ring every quarter hour, a longer ringing of bells at 7am and 7pm once signalled the start and end of the work day to the farmers in the valley. At one time, it was forbidden to walk the streets after the evening bells rang.

Note the Etruscan rough-carved gray basaltina stone incorporated into the base and the projecting white marble Roman corbels (another pair are found inside the church). Similar ancient architectural remnants can be found built into walls and benches throughout town. See how many you can find!

27 **Chiesa San Donato** was built on the site of what was probably a 600BC Etruscan and then Roman temple. The church is named for Saint Donato of Arezzo, who was named bishop in the mid-300's, then later persecuted and martyred.

The current structure is Romanesque in plan and was probably built by the *Longobardi* or Lombards from the north around 600AD.

In 1511, Bishop Ferdinand of Castille from Spain (look for the castle symbols inside) commissioned a renovation to reflect the new Renaissance style of the period.

On the facade, the three entrances date to around 1547. The center door was commissioned by Bishop Mercurio Vipera, the side entrances were commissioned by Canon Andrea DePomo. Note their names inscribed over the doors. High above in the triangular tympanum is a small ceramic statue of San Donato from 1535, flanked by two angels.

Once a cathedral, it was demoted to church when the Bishop's seat was moved to a safer location in Bagnoregio in 1699 after the large 1695 earthquakes.





Highlights of the interior include,

- a** the basins for holy water, created from ancient architectural relics
- b** 1674 hanging painting depicting Saint Bonaventura and the earliest known image of Civita
- c** frescoes, particularly of *Santa Maria Liberatrice*, Madonna of the Earthquake, which was covered until the plaster fell from the walls in the earthquake of 1695
- d** (left) relics of Roman martyr Santa Vittoria, once the patron saint of Bagnoregio who was stabbed to death in 251AD, and (right) Saint Hildebrand, a Bishop and native of Bagnoregio who became the patron saint upon his death in 873AD
- e** Pear wood Crucifix dates to the 1400's, from the School of Donatello. It is carried to Bagnoregio on Good Friday each year in an evening procession.

Visit the church store which sells a good, small book on the church's history.

There is lots of debate on the origin of the carved stone fragments set into the Chiesa's exterior south-side wall,

28 White marble or travertine, probably medieval. The plant growing here produces caper berries.

Gray triglyph and metope, possibly from a Roman temple frieze

White travertine limestone, probably medieval

29 *Via del Buccone*, small street. Note the projecting, communal **oven**.

30 *Cippo Romano*, a Roman gravestone with inscription in Latin. Other *cippi* have been incorporated into houses and gardens in town. The door in the half-arch was once a north-south road, now a private garden and house.

31 Niche with **Madonna plaque**, modern.

32 Half wall with carved **Roman stone pieces**, possibly from a sarcophagus. The arched opening at the end of the street is from the 1950's.

33 *Palazzo Contino*, the corner was once a tower, underneath are very deep caves. Note the painted ceiling inside one of the windows (if it's open).

34 Alma Civita, elegant restaurant where you can dine in an **Etruscan grotta**. The lowest *grotta* is a cool wine cellar. The tiny kitchen was once the base of a tower, note the true medieval pointed arch on the right above the kitchen door.

35 *NIAUSI/The Civita Institute* facilities, a Seattle, WA USA based non-profit has helped with the restoration of buildings in Civita and housed architecture students from the University of Washington for decades.

The Civita Institute sends fellowship recipients each year to conduct research and creative studies in Civita, of which this walking guide is one project!
www.CivitalInstitute.org

○ The ground underneath Civita is honeycombed with **grotte** or caves carved into the soft tufo stone upon which and of which the town is built. Some of the caves are believed to be 2500-3000 years old Etruscan in origin, but many have been modified and expanded over the centuries, with the Romans, for example, using caves for cisterns to collect water.

The *grotte* run under many houses and gardens two and three levels below the street and were probably primarily used as olive oil and wine storage. Temperatures in the bottom-most caves stay a constant 14c degrees/ 54F degrees. Wood casks were rolled down the **scendibotte**, steep stairs with narrow ramps on either side. Look for the metal ring at the top of some of the stairs, used with a rope to lower and raise the casks.

Some believe the caves may also have been ancient tombs, however Etruscans usually buried their deceased outside of their towns.

Caves for storage or **cantine** near street level often housed animals in winter. Some caves open out to the cliffside and were carved with small niches used as dovecotes. Pidgeons were used for food during Medieval and Renaissance eras.



Elements of a Typical Civita House

The structure is local *tufo* stone walls with large wood beams, some 500 years old, from the chestnut trees below town.

Older stone walls are made from squared stone with tight joints, while rebuilt newer walls have more random stone with more mortar.

At street level, upper door led to living quarters, lower door led to storage and animals in winter.

An exterior stone ring or *anello* on upper floors was used to bring hay to the top floor for storage in winter, to feed animals and insulate the house from the cold.

The lower stone rings or *anelle* that you see were used to tie up the donkeys that were used for transport. Note the *anello* is often near a stone bench for easier mounting and dismounting.

Thick stone walls allow window openings that are wider inside to maximise sunlight.

Large fireplaces were used for cooking and warmth in winter. Look for a small window set into the back of the fireplace to provide light while cooking or working, visible from the outside below chimneys.

Along the backs of houses are orchards or *orte*, used to grow herbs, fruits and vegetables--in Civita, it's like container gardening!

36 Antica Civitas, a small **Museum** in **Etruscan caves** with ancient olive oil press, Roman cistern, farm equipment, and great views to the Calanchi. During the 1930's a family lived in the caves below the house.

37 Antico Frantoio, a bruschetteria in a **cave** where you can view a **500 year old olive oil press** and farming tools. The very old **oven** on the outside was used by several families for cooking. In front is the well head of an ancient cistern that collected rain water. It is carved out of *tufo* and lined with clay to be waterproof.

38 **Giardino della Poeta**, a garden with dramatic views where a monastery once stood.

39 This ancient **road** once continued on to other towns. Shallow **caves** carved below into the cliffs were used as stables until a few years ago. The third cave, probably once an Etruscan tomb, is the *Capella del Carcere*, **Chapel of the Incarcerated**

housing an image of the Madonna and Child. In Medieval times, it was a jail.

40 **Etruscan tunnel** crosses under the entire town from south to the north, providing access to fields, the chestnut tree groves, and the Rio Chiaro below town. It was widened in the 1930's. During WWII, the tunnel served as a bomb shelter.

41 **Valle dei Calanchi** (kah-lahng-kee), a valley of dramatic, steep eroded remnants of what were once level farming fields, composed of loose, weathered sand and clay. This area was once the floor of a prehistoric ocean.

Enjoy Civita di Bagnoregio!
Arrivederci!



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