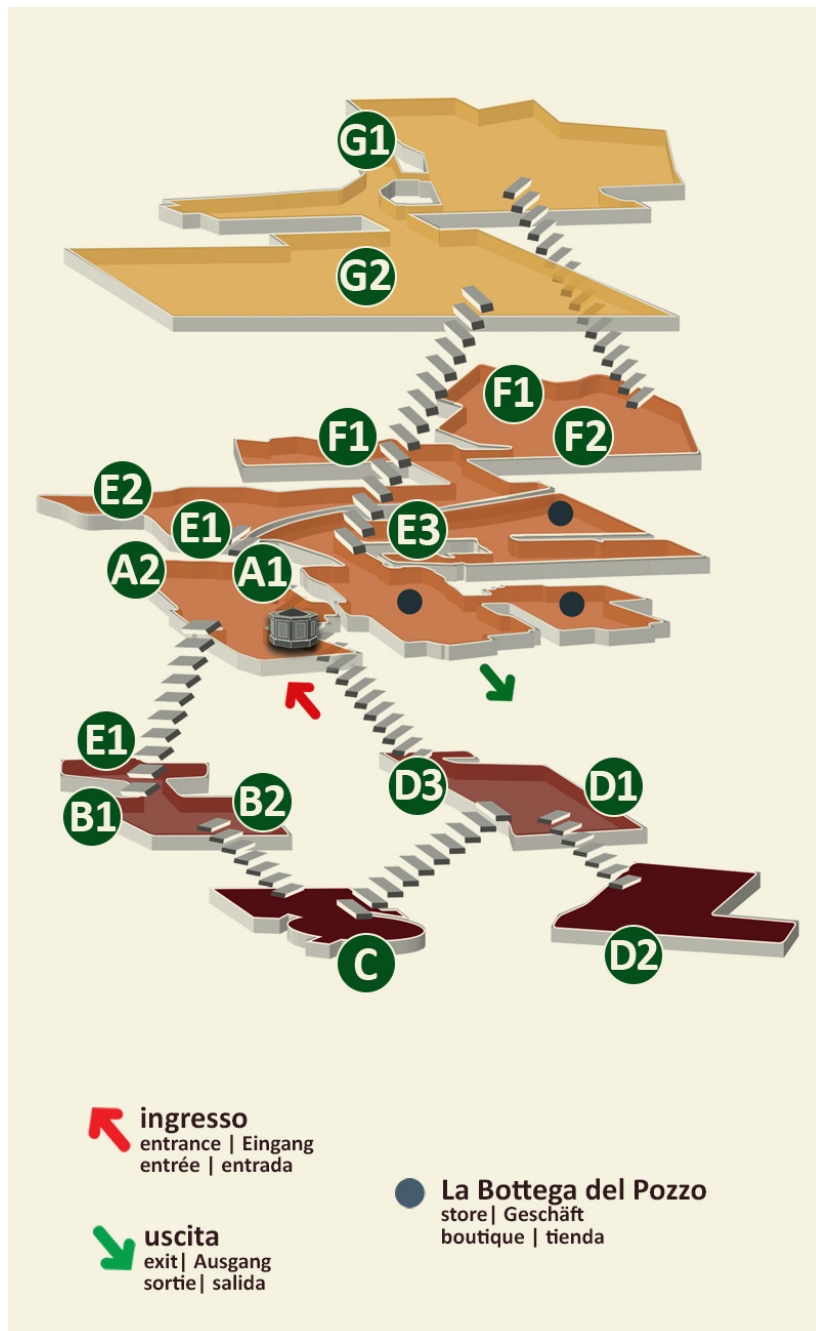




The underground caves of Orvieto's Medieval Quarter



First cave – ground floor:



The pottery

Orvieto majolica, between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

The first chamber of the itinerary was used, from the 13th to the 16th century as a pottery. Some 14th and 15th century kiln rejects may be seen on the wall, discarded because they were defective in shape or form.

Alongside some of these finds are exhibited reproductions that give an idea of the original appearance.



The kiln

The large kiln for first and second firings

A part of the chamber was excavated from the tufa rock and as a result of prolonged exposure to high temperatures the kiln walls have become white.

At each firing, the kiln was closed with a wall of heat-resistant bricks, the rectangular recess in the corner is the outlet of the chimney flue.

Renaissance ceramics - *Not just green and brown*

The most important majolica ceramics in the showcases are rejects from the potter's workshop, dating from the 15th and 16th century.

The discovery of this kiln, in 1985, showed that majolica was also produced at Orvieto in the 15th and 16th centuries, which until then were considered the mystery centuries in the history of Orvieto ceramics.

Second cave – first underground floor:

B1

The “*butto*”

A medieval garbage can

The small flask-shaped shaft is a Medieval “*butto*”.

Every house had to have one of these shafts to dispose of bones and solid inorganic refuse.

The “*butti*” have thus become reservoirs of finds that are an invaluable source of information for historians and archaeologists.

B2

From tomb to clay warehouse

An example of reusing

The cavity near the “*butto*” is difficult to interpret, having been continually modified over the course of the centuries. Its shape, in fact, is typical of an Etruscan tomb-bed, but the excavated central portion and the holes in the sides show that it might have been transformed into a fulling mill, a device used to compact and soften textiles.

If this was the case, it would be the first find of its kind in the medieval quarter and would confirm the contents of old documents which mention the many fulling mills that once existed in the area.

One thing is sure, in the centuries that followed they became used as clay deposit for the furnaces above, which was evidenced by the thick clay deposits found during their excavation.

Fourth cave- second underground floor:



The Pozzo (well) della Cava

A pit with a history going back twenty-five centuries

The structure

The well was excavated entirely from the lithoid tufa of the rock upon which Orvieto sits; it is 36 meters deep, the last few meters contain spring water.

It consists of two unified sections; the larger, round section has an average diameter of 3.40 meters, the smaller section is a rectangular shaft, measuring 60 x 80 cm and has the typical Etruscan “pedarole”, footholds cut into the walls to enable access.

Within the rectangular shaft, at a depth of 30 meters, there is a passage of around 170 cm in height and 20 m. long; the bottom, almost completely covered in mud and clay, has a deep groove on the left-hand side along which the water from the well ran.

At the base of the tunnel there are five holes set at regular intervals along the cylindrical wall; they housed the beams of a platform or a device to draw water from the well.

History

The history of the Pozzo della Cava goes back many centuries.

The rectangular-shaped shaft to the side is Etruscan, and was excavated as a test bore, in the search for the water table and also to allow access to the subterranean passages that carried water from springs.

In 1527 Pope Clement VII, fleeing from the Sack of Rome, took refuge at Orvieto and, before commissioning St. Patrick's Well, ordered the excavation of two public cisterns and the Pozzo della Cava, readapting the Etruscan structure so that water from the spring in the road could be utilized if the city came under siege. All the work was paid for by the local authorities of Orvieto and was completed in 1530. The well remained open until 1646, when the town authorities ordered its closure, as is demonstrated by the stone tablet shown near the well, originally situated at the well head in Via della Cava.

As to the reasons for this decision, popular rumour had it that five French officers, who attempted to molest women in the quarter, were thrown in to the well.

This form of body disposal continued into more recent times, so much so that in 1820 the Papal Delegate of Viterbo warned the local authorities of Orvieto about the practice in a letter, a copy of which is reproduced near the well.

When, after more than a century of disuse, in the December of 1984, Tersilio Sciarra uncovered the well, it was only twenty-five meters deep, the bottom being clogged with earth and the debris of centuries. Not until the spring of 1996, was work undertaken which would restore the structure to its original appearance.

Fifth cave – first underground floor:



A “*butto*” with vertical walls

Easier to dig but more dangerous

The small shaft near the stairs is another Medieval “*butto*”.

Unlike the first flask-shaped shaft, this one has vertical walls.

The conduit which leads from the dwelling above is visible, as are holes in the walls; they housed small beams upon which was constructed a platform, to avoid falling down the shaft.

The ceiling of the chamber should also be noted: this is a “patch” vault (*volta a toppa*), built over a heap of wood, the imprints of which can still be seen in the mortar.

Sixth cave – first and second underground floor:



An Etruscan cistern and a medieval cellar

Another example of adaptation

Between the fifth and the sixth cave it's possible to see a cistern for the collection of rainwater, later adapted by the cutting of a staircase.

That large reservoir is Etruscan, as is shown by the water-proof plaster still visible on its inner surface, made with ground terracotta and lime, a technique known as “*coccio pesto*”.

Water was collected from the roof-tops and ran through terracotta pipes, like those exhibited in the bottom of the cistern, to the reservoir after passing through a layer of filtering material.

The stairs have typical “*scendibotte*”, or ramps, at either side so that barrels could be rolled down into the cellar.

Don't forget that many of the subterranean spaces of Orvieto have always served as wine cellars, as they possess the three basic characteristics needed to conserve the famous wine of Orvieto: a constant temperature throughout the year, darkness and silence.

Seventh cave – ground floor:



The muffle-kiln

The kiln for the third firing of lustre ware

The structure found under the floor is the base of a muffle-kiln, the kiln used for the third firing of lustre ware.

Unlike the kiln seen in the first chamber (cut from the rock and used for first and second firings), this small kiln was built entirely of brick and tufa blocks without the use of mortar; the “*a riverbero*” or reverberatory kiln mentioned by Cipriano Piccolpasso in his work *I tre libri dell’Arte del Vasajo* (see figure), which was in circulation in Italy from the 15th to the 16th century.

The product of the third firing was lustre ware, the precious Renaissance ceramics, fragments of which can be seen in the last showcase, famous for its iridescent colours and sheen, comparable to gold and precious stones.

The discovery of this muffle-kiln, in 1998, has added another extremely interesting chapter to the history of Orvieto ceramics, demonstrating that lustre ware was also produced in the city.

In a nearby showcase some instruments used in this kiln are exhibited; particularly interesting are the terracotta and stone moulds, the trivets used to stop the ceramics touching during the second firing and some fragments of firing racks, used to hold plates inside the kiln.

The potsherds - *Three centuries of ceramics in fragments*

Near the muffle-kiln it’s possible to see a selection of fragment of different periods:

Glazed pottery (end of the 13th century): the object was painted and dipped in glaze before firing.

Old majolica (14th century): after an initial firing the object was dipped in glaze, then decorated using copper green and manganese brown before being fired again.

Fifteenth-century majolica: the same technique as before was used. The colours blue, yellow and orange were used in addition to green and brown.

Lustre ware (16th century): after the second firing the objects were decorated again with iridescent gold and ruby red, then fired for the third time.



The pillar of a tower

The remains of a Ghibelline bulwark

The large pillar in the centre of the chamber is all that remains of a great Medieval tower.

According to the historical tract *Cronica Potestatum*, this was the tower of the sons of Simone dei Filippeschi, right-handman of the famous Ghibelline captain, Neri Della Greca.

In the same tract one reads that the entire structure was demolished in 1313, when the Guelfs of Orvieto finally defeated the Ghibellines.

Eighth cave – ground floor and first floor:



The rock tombs

Many theories about twenty-seven centuries of transformation

The last two chambers of the itinerary, brought to light in 2002, were subject to an infinite number of adaptations and transformations which make it extremely difficult to interpret both their original use and their later modifications.

Archaeologists have suggested that they were used for keeping animals, as a necropolis, an enormous unfinished cistern, a settlement of dwellings, a dye-works, a tannery, and even as a baths complex.

Fortunately, however, the presence of two niches with side basins, one in the first chamber and one in the second, suggest that this was a necropolis excavated from the rock; in fact, almost identical structures are found in the older tombs of Norchia, in Lazio, which also have other similarities in common with these chambers, such as the horizontal channels along the walls and a multitude of holes cut into the tufa.

The rarity of such a discovery lies in the fact that until a year ago burials pre-dating the period of Etruscan settlement at Orvieto, had never been discovered in the area.

Ninth cave – first underground floor - ground floor and first floor:



The quarry and well number two

Centuries of history destroyed to build a road

The last chamber is the largest on the itinerary, its irregular ceiling which follows the natural seams of the rock, up to a height of 14 meters, suggests that it is also the oldest.

When, in the 19th century, the great embankment that supports the street above was constructed, most of the tufa required was quarried from here. Still visible are chisel marks made during the extraction of stone blocks and flaking of the rock due to the quarrying that has cancelled out most of the evidence of the Etruscan, Medieval and Renaissance past.

However, there still remain traces of an access stairway, on the highest part of the chamber, some niches of different periods, small channels and some vats, often retaining their plaster. The most important discovery is maybe the base of a well in the centre of the chamber; the 19th century damage does not allow it to be established whether this was excavated to create a cistern, a grain silo or more tombs. The use of well number two therefore remains a mystery.

Eighth cave – first floor:



The Etruscan passage

The tufa aqueduct

The passage at the end of the itinerary, which used to lead the spaces under the Palazzo Filippeschi, are of the same structure and orientation as those found at the bottom of the Pozzo della Cava.

The small channel cut into the floor served to carry water to various collection points. The singularity of the structure lies in the fact that this channel along the tufa wall, instead of towards the centre of a cistern, as is usual in similar Etruscan structures.

During the Second World War this passage was used as an air-raid shelter.

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Pozzo della Cava

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