This summer I had the pleasure of participating in the Caere Project, led by Professor Fabio Colivicchi of Queen’s University, Ontario, thanks in part to the generous funding of a Waldbaum Scholarship from the Archaeological Institute of America. As a student of art history, my work focuses primarily on the Italian Renaissance, with a secondary concentration in Classical antiquity. I am interested in exploring fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy not in isolation, but as a time and place influenced both by other geographic regions and by past eras. The Etruscan civilization in particular was “rediscovered” during the Renaissance, and had great bearing on many artists and thinkers of the period. For these reasons, I was eager to take part in excavations at Caere, an ancient Etruscan site.

The Etruscans are perhaps best known for their funerary art: the city of tumuli at Cerveteri and the beautiful painted tombs of Tarquinia. As few writings by the Etruscans survive, much of what we know about their society comes from these tombs. The Caere Project, however, is interested in exploring not Etruscan burial practices, but everyday life. The first inhabitants arrived at the ancient site of Caere in the tenth century BCE, with surviving buildings dating back to the seventh century BCE (though much of the construction is from the third century BCE). Caere was eventually absorbed by the Romans, with parts of the city abandoned in the second and first centuries BCE. Our excavation, occurring outside the modern town of Cerveteri and not far from the famous Banditaccia necropolis to the west, began in 2012. In past years, a notable hypogeum with painted walls and some intriguing inscriptions was found. This
summer we continued to work on excavating part of the city, an impressive example of early urban planning with regular walls, streets, and rooms.

Our excavations began with three days of removing all the layers of dirt that had been filled in at the end of last season, to reach the strata where the previous excavation had ended. Myself and a few others then focused on an area in the southeast corner, section 338, which proved to be one of the oldest parts of the site, dating from approximately the early sixth century BCE (figure 2). The space was a large rectangular room, delineated on all four sides by stone walls. The area was quite deep, eventually reaching down to the bedrock, but with evidence of multiple floor levels, implying that the space had been covered and raised over time. We found a number of coarse pottery fragments, including one partially complete pot with a lip that I uncovered, along with numerous animal bones and charcoal, suggesting that perhaps this was a kitchen. All of our discoveries were carefully labeled with the strata in which they were found. The final step upon reaching bedrock was to brush all the loose dirt clear, so the area could be photographed and measured.

Once we had completed section 338, which took up most of the first two weeks, I moved on to the opposite end of the site. With a colleague, I helped uncover a large pot (the largest we found this season), over 30 centimeters in diameter, buried deep in the dirt. The pot proved to be mostly intact, extending about a meter into the ground. The pot itself, though quite large, was not overly remarkable; what was more impressive was what was found in the vase. In the process of removing nine buckets of dirt from inside the pot, we found a number of smaller broken vessels, though with many of the pieces still present. These smaller pots were quite delicate and beautiful. A particularly lovely piece, reassembled by the on-site conservation team, was a small black vase, from the late Republican period, with a raised leaf decorative pattern.
I also assisted a group of students excavating the area next to where the large pot was found. This other room was particularly unusual due to the presence of over a dozen stones standing upright in the ground (figure 3). In this section, I found a pot that seems to have been intentionally broken, for ritual purposes. As excavations continued in this area, a large circular hole, bisected by a temporary wall that was eventually removed, was uncovered. The meaning of these stones and the large hole are unclear. Towards the very end of the dig, a stone bearing an Etruscan inscription was found in this region, a very unique discovery.

The site as a whole has a number of underground spaces, including a cistern and well, and pipes, suggesting that water was an important feature. The well and cistern were known from past years, but had not been extensively excavated. Early on this season the well was dug out; it extended downwards a good four meters, with foot holds for climbing carved into the side. At the bottom of the well were found a number of complete vases, intentionally placed there, perhaps in some sort of ritual when the site was abandoned. After excavating the well, we turned to the cistern, a much larger space (figure 4). I spent one day in the cistern, helping to clear the path underground that connects the cistern and well. More pottery and also some painted plaster was found in this area. Late in the season another underground chamber was discovered, near the well, also measuring at least four meters deep. The uncovering of any links between this space and the other underground areas will have to wait until next year. The function of all of these features remains unclear. The cistern and well, with its connecting pipes, seem to be for storing water, though not drinking water. Perhaps the water was needed for the manufacture of pottery or metal work.

Another set of tasks that I very much enjoyed was washing, sorting, and cataloging pottery fragments. We have thousands of pieces of pottery, including many trays from past
years, still waiting to be cataloged (figure 5). The first step in the process is washing the pieces, removing all the mud and dirt, but being especially careful not to harm the more delicate fragments, such as bucchero and painted wares. Next, the sherds from each section (sometimes only a few dozen pieces, other times a couple hundred) are sorted into groups such as coarse ware, cooking pots, amphora, red impasto, brown impasto, black impasto, bucchero, and geometric. This is a tricky task, especially as some of the pieces are so small, but we had an expert who guided us, and over time one develops a good eye. After the fragments are sorted, each category is counted, making note of the number of walls, bases, handles, and rims. As there are so many pottery fragments, the majority are put back in storage. However, very special pieces—such as ones with beautiful paintings or inscriptions, or larger, more complete fragments—are separated out and cataloged. Each piece is assigned a number, which is painted on its side, and then measured. Painting the catalog number on the sherds was also quite difficult, but a fun challenge. (I had the pleasure of labeling the very first find from 2015.)

Being able to participate in the excavations at Caere was the realization of a life-long dream and an incredibly rewarding experience. This field experience can only positively affect my studies as an art historian, giving me a better understanding of the life and art of the Etruscans, as well as a new appreciation of excavations conducted during the Italian Renaissance. I am so appreciative of the support of the Waldbaum Scholarship, which greatly offset my expenses and allowed me to partake in this incredible opportunity.
Images

figure 1: my housemates and I on the first day of excavating (I’m the second from the right)

figure 2: our corner, where we spent the first two weeks
figure 3: hard at work, surrounded by the peculiar standing stones

figure 4: looking up the cistern
figure 5: at the end of the season, we had two truck-fulls of pottery fragments!

figure 6: the whole team on the last day of digging (Prof. Colivicchi is in the front)