The Eugubian Tablets and the sacred rites of the ancient Umbrians

The Eugubian Tables (from the ancient name of Gubbio, Iguvium) are the most important things of the Civic Museum. The tablets were discovered in 1444 near the Roman Theatre in Gubbio after being buried for many centuries under the ground. Thanks to them, scholars have been able to reconstruct the language, culture, and religious tradition of one of the most ancient people of Italy. They consist of seven bronze tablets and they were written between the 3rd and the 1st-century a.C. to better preserve the sacred rites of Iguvium, at the time one of the most important religious centers of the Umbrian civilization. The tablets are written in ancient Umbrian using two "international" alphabets of the time, the Etruscan one and then the Latin one. With the Etruscan alphabet, the Umbrians wrote and read from right to left, with the Latin one they started from the left like us. The brotherhood of the Atiedii, an association ofimportant people in the community, had the task of handing down these texts and to carry out the public religious ceremonies with their officiant called in Umbrian "arsfertur". The sacred public rites were essential to obtain the protection of the Gods and to guarantee the welfare of the community: some rites were used to purify the city and the army, others were carried out for the fertility of the fields and an abundant harvest. Still, others served to strengthen social ties with other Umbrians communities with which they shared trade, pastures, forests, water. Some ceremonies were held on fixed dates, others were held when there was a need; in this case, before proceeding, the officiant had to ascertain the consent of the deity, asking the "augure", called Spector, to observe the flight of the four wishing birds over the city: the woodpecker and the magpie must have come from the north, the hoopoe and the crow from the south. This observation was called wishing and was carried out by a natural observatory called "uerfale", located on the heights between the rocks of the mountain. The ancient Umbrians didn't build temples but celebrated their religious rites outdoors in consecrated places and fenced with walls and fences, located on the top of a sacred mountain (OKRI). The Okri was also home to the federal sanctuary for multiple communities and was dedicated to Jupiter. The ceremonies could also take place in the glades of the sacred woods near springs and streams, in caves, along the passes, and at the sacred gates of the city. Gubbio had three doors: Trebulana, Tessenaca, and Vehia. Inside the sacred areas, there were also graves in which the faithful threw small statues in human form or animal, now called votive bronzes, left as a gift to the deity as a sign of gratitude for graces received. The ancient Umbrians honored many Gods, saw them present as forces in the cycle of nature or the life of the community through the actions of men. The most important Gods were: Giove (God, Father, and Patron of the federal shrine of the holy mountain), Marte (God of war and the riches of nature) and Vofione (God of lineage); then there were Cerfo (God of the growth of the crops), Pomono (God of fruits), Vesona (Goddess of the fertility of the fields also called Cupra), Trebo (the home), Tefro (the fireplace), Fiso Sancio (God of the covenant among men), Hondo (God of victory), Torsa (who flees the enemies) and Prestota (the defense from enemies). The most important moment of the religious rite was the sacrifice that consisted in the offering to the deity of animals (cattle, pigs, sheep, goats) and products of the earth such as vegetables (felsua) and fruits of the fields (arvia) but also desserts, bread and a cake similar to crescia (mefa). For the Gods of heaven, the offerings were burned on the sacred fire, for the Gods of the earth instead the offerings were buried in a pit placed under the altar. The offerings had to be of good quality without faults and consecrated through the spreading of substances such as flour (PONI) or wine (VINU). The Cesna, that is the ritual banquet, concluded the ceremonies. In addition to the officials of the brotherhood of the Atiedii, other important people of the community participated, such as magistrates, heads of families, and warriors. They consumed meat and products of the earth not offered to the Gods during the rite.