

THE ORIGINS OF A PEOPLE: THE ETRUSCANS AND THEIR CONTESTED PATERNITY

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The Etruscans of present-day Tuscany are a people whose greatest legacy to the world is the mystery of their appearance in history. As some have noted, “The Etruscans have long been the magical mystery people of antiquity.”¹ Their language—non Indo-European—is one of the few languages that remains mostly indecipherable except to translate it into words with no applicable meaning in current languages. The way of life that they led was significantly different than their contemporaries—the early Romans—and their prehistory is something that can only be theorized today.

Before the historical truths of the Etruscans were being discussed, the Greek poet Hesiod wrote, “They arose from the children of Odysseus and Circe.”² Though this is a fanciful account of the history of the Etruscans, it is evidence to the fact that ancient peoples’ earliest attempts to explain origins consisted of legendary tales which have little basis in historical fact. The legend of Romulus and Remus and the founding of Rome is only one example of this type of explanation. The two main modern theories grew out of the ancient attempts to track the source of the Etruscans. It was the Greek historians Herodotus (430 B.C.) and Dionysius of Halicarnassus in the first century B.C. that first wrote of the Etruscans and their ambiguous beginnings. Many historians have come down on one side or the other, creating a debate that has raged since Dionysius cast doubt on Herodotus.

Herodotus’ contention was that the Etruscans were migrants from Lydia. When the Lydians were having a particularly

severe famine, they split the population by lot and sent the losing half on a journey to find a new place to live in an effort to the lessen food requirements of their nation. The half that sailed from the shores of Anatolia eventually ended up in the northwest part of Italy—for nearly four hundred years, this was the commonly excepted truth. Dionysius, in the first century B.C., hypothesized that the Etruscans were not an immigrant nation, but that they were indigenous to northern Italy. Not through any evidence that he collected, but through logically taking the reasons that Herodotus laid out and applying a separate logic, he came to a different conclusion.

Modern historians have taken these two ancient historians’ arguments and expanded upon them, adding archaeological, scientific, literary, and linguistic evidence to support their claims. Scholars like Massimo Pallottino and Larissa Bonfante side with Dionysius and support the autochthony of the Etruscans.³ Pallottino states in an interview with *National Geographic*, “The beginning of the Etruscan people is back in pre history two or three thousand years before Christ. They formed themselves in Italy from a mixture of elements over time.”⁴ Raymond Bloch is of the faction that supports Anatolian migration. Michael Grant, however, takes the middle road and posits that the Etruscans were neither the product of a wholesale migration nor completely indigenous to northern Italy. He is of the opinion that the Etruscans evolved from the local peoples with the introduction of many different peoples at many different times—not one single migration but many smaller ones.⁵

In the presence of multiple theories of Etruscan origin, a thorough evaluation of all available evidence is necessary. When evaluating the evidence and taking into account the surrounding chronologies, a different conclusion can be reached.

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¹Rick Gore, “The Eternal Etruscans,” *National Geographic* (1988): 705.

²Ibid., 718.

³Ibid., 719.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Michael Grant, *The Etruscans* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 81-85.

This paper seeks to prove that the Etruscan culture was an indigenous one transformed by its contact with the Hellenistic and Near-East world. The Literary evidence, although contradictory, is biased in its perception of the Etruscans and the linguistic evidence, used to support the Anatolian theory, can be examined with different conclusions. The archaeological and scientific evidence shows that there were changes in how and where they lived in the first half of the seventh century B. C. in addition to how they evolved over the years up until their defeat by the Romans.

Beginning with Herodotus, many ancient historians wrote of the Etruscans. Although Herodotus puts forth the Lydian theory, even he admits to its questionable nature. Herodotus acquired this information from the Lydians themselves—they might have been seeking credit for something with which they were not involved. In fact, had there not been a connection made at that point in time, this theory may never have developed. The likeness of the Etruscan culture to the Lydian is comparable to its likeness to many other Near Eastern societies such as Syria and Phoenicia. The Lydian culture was unique when compared to other contemporary societies; the absence of some of Lydia's more distinctive characteristics in Etruscan society is somewhat suspect. With this, it is highly unlikely that any one single migration could have given rise to the Etruscan people.⁶ The Greek people, long at odds with both the Lydians and the Etruscans, found ease in comparing the two enemy peoples to one another.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus was the first to question the Anatolian migration theory of Etruscan paternity in his book *Roman Antiquities*. There he questioned the validity of the Lydian claim on the basis of the incongruence in language, deities, and administration.⁷ The languages that the two peoples spoke were almost as different as could be possible: one Indo-European and one not. The Etruscan deities were the precursors

⁶Ibid., 71-81.

⁷Dionysius, Ch. 30.

to those of the Romans—a group of deities with little similarities to that of the Lydians. Their order of society had only a few congruencies; their laws and justice system bore no resemblance to that of the Anatolians. Polybios likewise mentions the Etruscans in his *Histories* when he talks about the Po Valley. He names the Etruscans as the “oldest inhabitants”⁸ of that plain. The Dionysian theory allows for the Etruscan people to form their own timeline with no specific dates attached to it other than that of the transformation from Bronze Age culture to Iron Age culture in the seventh and eighth centuries. Conversely, the Herodotus theory only allows for a migration in the fourteenth century B.C.; the time following the Trojan War, and the time from then to the emergence of the Etruscan culture in the seventh century goes unexplained.

Herodotus maintains that the Etruscans, or Tyrrhenians as he named them, should be thought of as Lydian descendants. The main reason behind that contention, other than the Lydian claim, is the likeness of their name from the Greeks, Tyrrhenian, to the name of a town in Lydia.⁹ Tyrrhenian is also purported to have been taken from the name of the leader of their migration, the Lydian king's son, Tyrrhenus.¹⁰ The conclusion that the Greek name for the Etruscans, “Tyrrhenian,” was Lydian in etymology is not necessarily correct. If it were Lydian, then there would be a connection between the two languages that the peoples spoke. In fact, no dialect of the Lydian language has ever been found to resemble the non Indo-European language of the Etruscans.¹¹ Had there been a whole-sale migration of the Lydian people then surely they would have kept the language of their past. However, when the people of Etruria emerged in the eighth century, they came equipped with a fully developed

⁸Jim Perry, “The Mysterious Etruscans,” <http://www.mysteriousetruscans.com/index.html>, accessed April 1, 2006.

⁹Grant, *The Etruscans*, 72.

¹⁰Raymond Bloch, *The Etruscans*, trans. Stuart Hood (New York: Praeger, 1958), 55.

¹¹Raymond Bloch, *The Ancient Civilization of the Etruscans*, trans. James Hogarth (New York: Cowles Book Co., 1969), 66.

culture which included a language completely unrelated to any language known even today. From the Etruscan texts and inscriptions that have been unearthed, there are only 300 words of any significance that have been translated.¹²

As the language still confounds the modern linguists, the Etruscan culture is becoming unearthed by Archaeologists day by day in Italy. Every new Excavation reaffirms D.H. Lawrence's statement, "Italy is more Etruscan in its pulse than Roman; and will always be so."¹³ The more that is uncovered about the Etruscans, the more they resemble many of the local peoples of Italy. Had there been a large-scale migration of Lydians to the Po Valley, whether in the time following the Trojan War, or in the more probable eighth century B.C., there would be some evidence of the invasion of the people that already occupied the area, the Villanovans. In reality, there was no "archaeological break," no disturbance in the excavations from the time. There was evidence of individual and small group immigrations to Etruria, but none of the upheaval that would have accompanied the arrival of large groups of people was ever evidenced in the excavations in and around Etruria.¹⁴

The one piece of evidence that the Anatolian theorists hold up as a banner for their cause is the finding of an Etruscan inscription on a stone grave stele dated to the sixth century B.C. on the Island of Lemnos.¹⁵ This is an important find because it places Etruscans in the Aegean. However, the exact date of this artifact lessens its significance to the Anatolian theory. If the theory were to truly be supported by this stele, it would have to be dated in the fourteenth century, the time of the supposed Lydian migration. The fact that it was placed in the sixth century actually weakens the validity of the Lydian claim. The period in which the stele was placed was a time of expansion and growth for the Etruscans. Logically, the northern trek of the

¹²Gore, "The Eternal Etruscans," 699.

¹³Ibid., 715.

¹⁴Ibid., 719.

¹⁵Perry, "The Mysterious Etruscans," accessed April 1, 2006.

Lydian contingent would not have made sense. If they ended up in the northwestern part of Italy, they would not have started their journey with a little side trip to an island not far enough away to be considered the ancient equivalence of a pit stop. This relic in fact can be seen as evidence to the fact that the Etruscans, at the time of this stele's inscription, were in contact with the Near Eastern world and were making significant forays into that world; maybe even enough to warrant a port in the Aegean.¹⁶

There are other finds that allegedly support the Lydian theory but when they are examined under a more critical light, they actually weaken the theory. The Etruscans were known for their use of animal organs and entrails to divine the future. The *haruspices* particularly used the livers of many animals because they alone show the greatest differentiation and variety in color. To use as examples there were many models of livers made—some in bronze, some in terracotta. This particular aspect of the Etruscans was thought to have linked them with the Lydians and their particularly divination-concerned culture. As a matter of fact, there have been recent digs in ancient Syria and Babylonia that have uncovered many terracotta livers with predictions written on them specific to the organ.¹⁷ This only adds to the claim that the Lydians are no more connected to the Etruscans than other Near Eastern peoples.

Another connection to the Near East is the status of women. In Etruscan society, it was not uncommon for a woman to be lying with her husband at dinner. It was also not uncommon for her to be dining with other men. Etruscan women did not have to take their father's name and were allowed unprecedented freedoms compared to women in other ancient Italian societies.¹⁸ Thus feminine freedom can be compared to the freedom that many in the Near East experienced. Though not specifically linked to Lydia, the status similarities can stand as a connection.

¹⁶*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2006 ed., s.v. "Ancient Italic People."

¹⁷Bloch, *The Ancient Civilization of the Etruscans*, 66-67.

¹⁸Special Publications Division, National Geographic Society, *Mysteries of the Ancient World* (Washington: National Geographic Society, 1979), 77.

Throughout their rise and fall, the Etruscans were producing enough iron that merchants across the Mediterranean were flocking to their ports to acquire it. For this and their famously elegant shoes the Etruscans received many luxurious items from people such as the Phoenicians.¹⁹ Though this appears to support the Anatolian theory, it can also be seen as evidence that the people of Etruria had a long-standing connection with the Near East. Likeness does not equal sameness.

The Etruscan culture that came into being in the eighth and seventh centuries was one which grew steadily over the older Villanovan culture. This older culture rose to prominence in the area in the tenth century B.C. The Villanovans formed the villages that the Etruscans would later take over and expand.²⁰ One of the Etruscan's greatest qualities was their ability to come into contact with the outside world and take from it only what they wanted and bypass the aspects they deemed inferior. When coming into contact with Greece, they adopted some of the Greek art but left behind the Greek view of the afterlife until their dominance of the north of Italy began to decline in the sixth century B.C.²¹ If the Etruscans had been originally Lydian, with their culture intact until its emergence into history, then they would not have so easily assumed the constraints of such a different belief system.

Archaeology is not the only science that can reveal more about an ancient people. Recent developments in genetics have allowed scientists to take samples of DNA from the skulls excavated in Etruria. One study compared the mitochondrial DNA of Etruscans to the mitochondrial DNA of other ancient peoples.²² This experiment used relatively new techniques, and

¹⁹Gore, "The Eternal Etruscans," 730.

²⁰Ibid., 719.

²¹Ibid., 706-707.

²²Mitochondrial DNA is the only DNA that is transferred directly from the parents to the children—through the mother. Through the mitochondrial DNA it is possible to trace the maternity back an infinite number of years, providing that the mixing of DNA does not cause some genes to die out completely. The assumption here is that if people are marrying within the same ethnic group,

many of the ancient peoples have not been equally profiled. For this reason, the study was not completely flawless. Through this study, researchers have reached two conclusions. The first is that the people known as Etruscans shared ancestors; that is to say, they were not a group of people who ended up in the same area as each other due to similarities in character. The second is that there was a distinct similarity between the DNA of modern Turks and the Etruscans. This proves the fact that there were, within the Etruscan population, those of Eastern descent.²³

Through careful consideration of all manner of evidence on the Etruscans and their origins, the conclusion is that the Etruscans were autochthonous, indigenous to the north and west of Italy, and evolved because of their growing role in the merchant system of the Mediterranean Sea. The literary, linguistic, archaeological, and scientific data all combine to support the autochthony of the Etruscan people rather than Lydian ancestry. Though scholars may discuss the differences in origin theories, until an Etruscan history is found, written by Etruscans themselves, it will always remain a mystery. As has been remarked in the past, "The Etruscans have long been the magical mystery people of antiquity."²⁴

there will be repetitive sets of genes that will reoccur frequently. If there is much intermarrying between different ethnicities, some of those genes die out and others are introduced into the ethnic group.

²³Cristiano Vernesi, et al., "The Etruscans: A Population-Genetic Study," *American Journal of Human Genetics* 74, no. 4 (2004), 701-702.

²⁴Gore, "The Eternal Etruscans," 705.