

The Elusive Etruscans: The Quest for the Origins of the Etruscan Civilization

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The Romans prided themselves on their ability to embrace the very best aspects of each culture that they encountered. There was one culture in particular, however, that held their fascination: the Etruscans. Strabo in his *Geography* acknowledges many Roman debts to Etruria, from religion to public displays to music.¹ But just who were these great Etruscans? Where did they come from? These questions have long been the source of great interest and contention. Even the Romans disagreed on the origins of Etruscan culture. Centuries later, Etruscology experienced a rich and erudite “prehistory,” which lasted from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth. It was during this critical time that archaeology became recognized as a valid method of research and the interest in Etruscan artifacts ushered in a new era of speculation surrounding Etruscan origins. By the twentieth century, interest surrounding the Etruscans exploded as more and more sites and artifacts were found. There is a plethora of scholarship from this period, all of which seeks to make its place in Etruscology. However, this early blossoming of scholarship often succeeded only in emphasizing the ephemeral quality of the Etruscans. Scholarly uncertainties and

polemics on the interpretation of Etruscan inscriptions, the classification of the language and the problem of Etruscan origins gave birth to the notion of an “Etruscan mystery.”² Scholars have since developed many theories to help solve this mystery.

Theories surrounding Etruscan origins fall into three categories: the “eastern” hypothesis, which posits that the Etruscans were a people who came from the east and settled in Etruria; the “northern” hypothesis, which argues that the Etruscans were a part of a folk movement from the Balkans; and finally the “autochthonous” hypothesis which refutes all of the previous scholarship and states that the Etruscans developed locally without any large influx of new people. Scholars mainly use three main different methodologies to study Etruscan origins: historical, linguistic, or archaeological. Historical tradition was the primary form of discourse for hundreds of years, until archaeology became a more systematic and attainable mode of inquiry. Starting in the 19th century, linguistic studies also advanced greatly, making it possible to decipher the unique Etruscan language. In order to produce persuasive scholarship on the topic, it has become critical to use a symbiosis of all three methodologies. As scholarship and methodologies have developed and advanced, scholars have finally begun to remove the veil of mystery surrounding the origins of the Etruscans.

The first reference in ancient literature referring to the Tyrrhenoi, or the Etruscans, comes from Hesiod’s *Theogony*: “And Circe, daughter of Helios, Hyperion’s son, bore in love to steadfast Odysseus, Agrios and Latinus, noble and strong, who far away in the remote holy islands ruled over the famous Tyrsenians.”³ In the fifth century BC, Herodotus was the first author to

attempt to trace the origins of the Etruscans. Herodotus explains that the Tyrrhenoi were originally Lydians who were afflicted by a disastrous famine during the reign of Atys, son of Manes. For some time they endured the famine, but when it showed no sign of abating, they decided to look for a more fertile land. What they found was the abundant land of Etruria on the Italian peninsula. The Lydians then changed their names to Tyrrhenians in honor of prince Tyrrhenos, who had led them to safety.

This assessment of the Etruscans held for many years and was echoed by most Greek and Roman writers. Virgil, Ovid, and Horace often called the Etruscans “Lydians” in their poems.⁴ However, in the Age of Augustus a challenger emerged. Dionysus of Halicarnassus argued a new theory: “I do not think that the Tyrrhenians were emigrants from Lydia. In fact they do not have the same language as the Lydians...They do not worship the same gods as the Lydians; [and] they do not have the same laws.” Dionysus thus concluded that “the Etruscans [were] not a people who came from abroad, but [were] an indigenous race.”⁵ Thus, since the first century BC these two opposing views dominated the debate surrounding the origins of the Etruscans.

The issue of Etruscan origins arose again in earnest during the nineteenth century with the unification of Italy. At first only classical texts were used to prove the origins of the Etruscans. Unfortunately, due to the lack of source material, these arguments failed to advance any new theories, and often degenerated into polemics based on the preconceived theses from classical times.⁶ The subsequent rise of archaeology changed the Etruscan debate dramatically. This movement was defined primarily by the works of

N. Fréret, B.G. Niebuhr, and K.O. Müller. These authors rejected the Asia Minor tradition of Herodotus, using Dionysus's negative arguments to refute it.⁷ Yet they did not accept Dionysus's "autochthonous" theory entirely. These scholars, especially Müller, focused on Dionysus's name for the Etrurians, which was "Rasena." They compared this name to that of the Alpine Raetians, and formed the "northern" hypothesis; they believed that the Etruscans had in fact descended from the Alps into central Italy. This argument dominated debates for many years, until the rise of the study of comparative linguistics and archaeological studies became more advanced.

The development of Indo-European comparative linguistics changed the face of the Etruscan question. Questions arose as to whether or not Etruscan belonged to the Indo-European group of languages, and more specifically, the Italic sub-group. Linguistic research was used initially to support the "northern" thesis of Müller and the others. At that time, however, linguistic studies were such that they could be used to advance practically any theory of Etruscan origins. In the fervor of trying to ascertain the origin of Etruscan language, some scholars made irresponsible, if not laughable, comparisons with anything from Celtic, to Gothic, to Ugric.⁸ As a result, linguistics was often abandoned in favor of archaeology.

As archaeology became more systematized, more Etruscan sites were found and studied. Archaeologists revealed an Etruscan civilization which spanned from Etruria to Campania, and even into the eastern part of the Po valley. In addition, more was discovered about the people who lived in the area before the Etruscans. Archaeologists uncovered the earliest recognizable phase of the Etruscan civilization, known as the Orientalizing pe-

riod. This development was quickly followed by the discovery of an earlier civilization, which was named the Villanovan culture of the Iron Age. Delving even deeper, archaeologists identified another group of people known as the Protovillanovans. This discovery came about through the recognition and identification of different funerary customs in the same site. The funerary culture of the prehistoric period in Etruria consisted exclusively of inhumation. In the Protovillanovan period, however, cremation became the primary funerary rite, and it dominated into the early stages of the Villanovan period as well. The later Villanovan and Orientalizing periods witnessed a return to inhumation in southern and coastal Etruria.⁹

Upon combining these threads of literary evidence, linguistic comparison, and archaeological findings, scholars put forth three main theories concerning Etruscan origins: the first advocates and develops the original thesis of Herodotus and ascribes an eastern origin to the Etruscans; the second follows the teachings of Niebuhr and Müller and argues that the Etruscans came into Italy from the north; and the final theory attempts to uphold Dionysus's theory of an autochthonous people and seeks the origin of the Etruscans in the prehistoric peoples of Italy.¹⁰

The "northern" theory is based primarily upon archaeological and linguistic evidence, with some historical support from Livy. Adherents to the "northern" thesis hold that Italy's cultural development was affected at an early stage by a decisive ethnic movement of transalpine origin.¹¹ The Terramara peoples of the Balkans and northern Italy spread down the peninsula, bringing with them their tradition of cremation. The main advocate of this theory was Hugh Hencken. Hencken argued for the similarities between

central European urn fields and the urn fields in Etruria: “It seems to me that true Villanovan contains some rather fundamental elements traceable to the central Balkans.”¹² He sees the break in funerary practice between inhumation and cremation as evidence of an intervening culture in Etruria. Hencken also allows the possibility that eastern influences played a role in shaping later Etruscan culture.

Linguists such as W. Corssen and E. Lattes supported the “northern” theory based on their shared opinion that Etruscan was an Indo-European Italic language. They argued that word *Rasena* (the Etruscan name for themselves) came from the Raeti, an Alpine tribe.¹³ Livy seemed to confirm this when he wrote that “even the Alpine populations have the same origin as the Etruscans, particularly the Raetians.”¹⁴ Thus the Raetians moved down the peninsula, and the Villanovans adopted their language and funerary practices. The “northern” thesis carried some weight initially, but during the twentieth century, it came under increasing attack. New scholars tended to reaffirm the importance of the early prehistoric peoples and cultures in the Italian peninsula, as opposed to that of the presumed Northern invaders.¹⁵ This argument was later abandoned completely as more archaeological and linguistic evidence came to light. By Raymond Bloch’s era, the “northern” theory was nearly debunked: “At present this thesis, although it has not been abandoned completely, has very few adherents.”¹⁶ Bloch addresses the problems of this thesis, which he says used correct facts “to arrive at wrong conclusions.”¹⁷ For example, the presence of Etruscans in Raetia is certain, but the chronology is very different from what the “northern” theorists posited. It was not until the fourth century BC that the Etruscans reached the Alpine

foothills, which was the result of a Celtic invasion that forced Etruscans to flee north. Thus the movement was a movement *out* of Etruria, not into it. As a result, the “northern” thesis retreated into the fringes of Etruscology, while the debate between the “eastern” and “autochthonous” theses increased.

By the mid-twentieth century, the “eastern” theory was the best known and most widely accepted.¹⁸ The greatest amount of scholarship supporting the “eastern” thesis was written during this time. The scholarship that appeared in the 1960s was heavily based in literary sources with a complement of archaeological evidence. Raymond Bloch was the primary proponent of the “eastern” thesis. He begins his argument by citing the passage from Herodotus explaining the Lydian movement into Italy. He also cites Virgil, Ovid and Horace who all use the terms “Etruscan” and “Lydian” interchangeably. Another piece of historical evidence Bloch uses is from Tacitus’s *Annals*, which states that the Lydian town of Sardes preserved the memory of their Etruscan origin and the Lydians considered themselves to be brothers of the Etruscans.¹⁹ Classical writers then, Bloch argues, “did not seem to doubt the correctness of the ancient tradition.”²⁰ He treats Dionysus’s refutation of traditional sources as an anomaly, but concedes that it sparked the Etruscan debate.

After offering a refutation of the “northern” thesis, Bloch offers his own analysis of the Etruscan name Rasena and other linguistic findings.²¹ He argues that the national name of Rasena “is found in various similar forms in different dialects of Asia Minor.”²² The Hellenized name of Tyrrhenoi also appears to have eastern origins. For example, there is a place

in Lydia which is called *Tyrra*. The root *tarch* is of particular importance in the Etruscan language. In literary tradition, the brother of Tyrrhenos is Tarchon. The name of the sacred city of Tarquinia has similar origins. Bloch states that names derived from the root *tarch* are also numerous in Asia Minor, and they are usually given to gods or princes, which would be consistent with literary tradition.

Bloch also attributes much importance to the Kaminia stele, which was discovered in 1885 on Lemnos. The monument dates from the seventh century BC, which is much earlier than the subsequent Greek conquest in 510 BC. The alphabet of the inscription is Greek, but the language is not. Bloch states that the Kaminia stele was later found to be written in an Etruscoid language. Other inscriptions in the same language were found, which led scholars to believe that it was not just one Etruscan individual, but a community. Bloch argues that if the Tyrrhenians indeed came from the east, they could have easily stopped in the Aegean islands and left behind small groups. Thus, Bloch states, “the Kaminia stele, which is more or less contemporary with the birth of the Etruscan civilization in Tuscany, is easily explicable within the framework of the Oriental hypothesis.”²³

Bloch does not rely solely on linguistic and historical evidence. He also examines elements of Etruscan culture and their similarity to eastern cultures. He focuses primarily on the status of women and religious practices. Women enjoyed a distinctive position in Etruscan society: “The position occupied by the woman was a privileged one and had nothing in common with the humble and subordinate condition of the Greek woman.”²⁴ Women took part in banquets with their husbands and children often took

the names of both parents, instead of the Roman practice of solely using the patronymic. There is evidence of the use of the matronymic in Anatolia, particularly in Lydia. Bloch uses this as proof of an eastern tradition of matriarchy that Etruscans continued when they arrived in Italy.

Etruscan religion was also unique within Italy. Etruscans emphasized the art of divination and the reading of signs, particularly haruspicy, a method of interpreting signs from the liver and entrails of birds. Bloch finds compelling comparisons with other eastern peoples, particularly the Babylonians, who used lightning bolts to predict the future.²⁵ In addition, archaeological excavations in Asia Minor and Babylonia discovered terra-cotta models of livers, thus providing further evidence of Etruscan kinship with eastern tradition.²⁶ As a result, this “converging series of well-established facts” in Bloch’s mind reinforces his conviction and support for the “eastern” thesis.²⁷ He rejects the “autochthonous” theory because it cannot account for the marked change of culture and the vast evidence of eastern influence that he found in his research.

Emeline Richardson also adhered to the “eastern” theory with minor modifications. Richardson wrote extensively on the various literary traditions and how they fit into archeological findings. Scholars had focused primarily on the conflicting Greek traditions of the origins of the Etruscans and often downplayed Roman sources in their evaluation of the sources. Richardson, however, favored Pliny’s thesis that there were in fact two migrations of foreigners from the east to Central Italy, who in time blended with the original inhabitants.²⁸ Richardson states that she did not come to this conclusion lightly. She began as a Herodotean, and tried to convert to

the “autochthonous” theory, but in the end she observed too much of a marked difference between the Villanovans and the Etruscans to be convinced of a completely indigenous culture.²⁹ She emphasizes the tradition of Pliny the Elder: The Umbrians were expelled from Etruria in ancient times by the Pelasgians, and these in turn by the Lydians who took the name of Tyrrheni from their king.³⁰ She paints the Villanovans as “a cremating people with many cultural connections with northern Europe” and states that they arrived from the sea between 1000 and 900 BC. Before their arrival, Richardson believes that Etruria was already settled by Bronze Age tribes similar to the pastoral Apenninic peoples of the mountainous spine of Italy, who were probably the first Indo-European speaking peoples in the peninsula.³¹ She argues that the Bronze Age tribes could be Pliny’s Umbrians, and that the Pliny’s Pelasgians were the Villanovan cremating people. Richardson’s thesis is a melding of both the “eastern” “northern” theses, which is somewhat surprising as Pliny does not mention a continental movement. Yet her fundamental argument essentially fits the broader thesis that Etruscan culture originated from elsewhere. While many scholars supported this thesis, there were others who vehemently held to the “autochthonous” theory.

Massimo Pallottino was the first to address the “autochthonous” theory in depth. Using unprecedented amounts of archaeological evidence, Pallottino was the first to offer a comprehensive analysis of the civilizations of Etruria, especially Tarquinia.³² Pallottino begins his discussion of the origins of Etruscan culture by casting doubt on the validity of source tradition. Pallottino argues that before Dionysus, opinions about the origin of the Etruscans did not seem to have been based on serious discussion. Like most

ancient writings on the origins of peoples and cities of the Greek and Italic world, they lay on the border between history and myth, and at best they sought confirmation in etymological and onomastic similarities.³³ Once he has portrayed source tradition as suspect, Pallottino turns to his preferred method of inquiry: archaeology.

Pallottino rejects the idea that the introduction of cremation and the subsequent re-adoption of inhumation in funerary practices had to do with arrivals of foreign cultures. He argues that in Republican Rome, both rites existed side by side, and that the matter was strongly linked to family traditions. The prevalence of cremation at the end of the Republic and during the first century of the Empire was followed in the second century AD by the general adoption of inhumation, though no ethnic transformation accompanied the change.³⁴ Pallottino's comparison may be problematic due to the unique circumstances of the time. Christianity was becoming more popular, which advocated inhumation because of the belief that Christ would raise the dead and bring them to the Eternal kingdom. Despite the problem with his analogy, Pallottino also cites research that demonstrates that cremation and inhumation existed in different areas of Etruria simultaneously during the Villanovan era, which shows continuity, rather than a break, between the two cultures.

During the resurgence of enthusiasm for the "autochthonous" theory, Bloch offered a rebuttal to Pallottino's opinions. Bloch rejects Pallottino's thesis on the grounds that if the theory of "autochthony were to be carried to its logical conclusion it would be difficult to understand the sudden appearance of industrial and artistic activity, as well as of religious beliefs and

rites of which there was no previous indication on Tuscan soil.”³⁵ Despite Bloch’s objections, the “autochthonous” theory steadily gained popularity. Pallottino’s writings dominated Etruscology and influenced many subsequent authors.

The “autochthonous” theory is almost completely based in archaeology. There is little room for literary sources, and soon Herodotus himself came under attack. Dominique Briquel did extensive work on the source tradition that Herodotus drew from to write his histories. The Lydian theory, Briquel argues, is not Herodotus’s own. The first words of his paragraph on Etruscan origins are “*Ἰταλῶν τῶν ἐν τῇ Ἰταλίᾳ*”³⁶ which emphasizes the idea that these were not necessarily Herodotus’s views. Briquel argues that the Lydian legend was created in the court at Sardis in the early sixth century BC for reasons surrounding Lydian foreign policy at the time. Such deliberate political fabrication deprives the story of any claim to truth or foundation in earlier tradition.³⁷ Briquel concludes that “no discussion of Etruscan origins must omit to mention this point in the future.” As a result of Briquel’s work, many scholars have eliminated historical tradition as a viable means to ascertain the truth behind Etruscan origins.

By the 1990s, archaeology became the primary *modus operandi* in the search for the Etruscans. Virtually all archaeologists agreed that the evidence was overwhelmingly in favor of the “autochthonous” theory of Etruscan origins. Barker and Rasmussen’s joint project on the Etruscans reflects this emphasis on archaeology and the contempt for source tradition. According to Barker and Rasmussen, “the development of Etruscan culture has to be understood within an evolutionary sequence of social elaboration

in Etruria.”³⁸ They continue by stating that “there is no evidence for the kind of cultural break at the Villanovan/Etruscan transition envisaged by either of the ‘plantation’ models from the eastern Mediterranean, or for a folk movement of either kind from continental Europe in the Late Bronze Age.”³⁹ As more sites were found and studied, a pattern of continuity between the different civilizations arose. According to their research, the overwhelming evidence of the archaeological record is that the origins of Etruscan society lie fundamentally in the later prehistoric communities of Etruria. This does not mean, however, that the culture of the Etruscans arose without any outside influences. Many scholars who have accepted the general thrust of the indigenous argument still prefer to use the evidence of external contact to explain the critical transition from Villanovan to Etruscan society in the eighth century BC. Contact with the outside world, particularly with the Greeks and the Phoenicians, was certainly an important factor within the final stages of this process, but scholars disagree about the extent to which such contact was a cause of increasing cultural complexity in Etruria, or a result.⁴⁰ Regardless of the degree of influence, the Etruscan culture developed on Italian soil.

Until very recently, Villanovan cemeteries and their associated rite of cremation had been considered as evidence for the arrival of a new people in Italy from north of the Alps. This was archaeological proof of the continental theory of Etruscan origins, which was essentially Hencken’s. The consensus now is that the rite of cremation was adopted in late Bronze Age and Iron Age Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, in much the same way that it was in Britain or the United States in the twentieth century.⁴¹ Thus the

change in practice occurred locally and within the confines of Etruria. This lends credence to Pallottino's argument that cremation was not without precedent in Etruria and that Romans often followed one practice or the other according to their particular family tradition. The two customs, then, coexisted within the same society.

Other recent archaeological works accept the "autochthonous" theory without debate and instead seek to answer questions about other socio-economic concerns surrounding the development of the Etruscan city-state. Mario Torelli in his article "The Etruscan City-State" addresses the history of the Etruscans without delving too deeply into the debate about origins. For Torelli, the "autochthonous" theory of the Etruscans is the accepted point of view. Torelli focuses instead on the continuities between the Protovillanovan, Villanovan, and Etruscan townscape. Torelli argues that the emergence of a distinct Etruscan culture was "the product of the beginning of segmentation process of the earlier tribal groups."⁴² The Protovillanovan settlement marked a change in local cultures, which led to the Villanovan settlement prevalent in Etruria.

The Villanovans in Etruria were, according to Torelli, "backward" compared to other Italic groups, which is why there are many Latin names of gods in Etruscan religion.⁴³ Thus, the emergence of the Etruscans was a gradual development of native Italic people who adopted culture from other Italic peoples. Since the spread of the Villanovan culture overlaps almost perfectly with the historical diffusion of the Etruscans, "the obvious conclusion seems to be that the cultural background of Etruscan urban civilization was the rise of the Villanovan culture."⁴⁴ Torelli depicts the Villanovans as a

colonizing force, who placed colonies among the Protovillanovans. Etruscan city-states arose from a synoecism of these Villanovan villages and this culminated in the creation of the dodecapolis of the Etruscan League.⁴⁵

Robert Leighton's case study of Tarquinia echoes Torelli's summation of events. Leighton favors the "autochthonous" theory, though he allows for outside influences from Greek and Phoenician merchants. Leighton argues that increased interaction between these groups most likely occurred in the eighth century BC. "It is unfortunate that the date is not fixed more precisely," Leighton laments, "because if it did occur earlier it would strengthen the case for viewing this early stage in the development of the Etruscan city in terms of an endogenous process, peculiar to the Villanovan culture." This would then weaken the idea that external influences provided the main impetus for local change in the eighth century.⁴⁶ Leighton echoes the work of Barker and Rasmussen, who questioned whether it was the arrival of Greek traders that prompted the emergence of powerful chiefs, or whether the previous existence of powerful chiefs in southern Etruria had been the cause of the Greeks' choice to trade with them.⁴⁷ Thus the argument can be looked at from a variety of perspectives, depending upon which theory the particular scholar accepts.

Thus it seemed to many scholars that the Etruscan mystery was no more. They were clearly an autochthonous people who developed on Italic soil with minor influences from Greek and Phoenician merchants. Most literature from the 1990s reflects this confident attitude. But there are a few who are not completely convinced that the "autochthonous" theory answers all the questions surrounding the Etruscans.

The primary obstacle to the “autochthonous” theory is the apparent uniqueness of the Etruscan language, and its failure to fit into the Indo-European paradigm. Larissa Bonfante once wrote that “the problem of Etruscan origins is encapsulated in the peculiarity of their language.”⁴⁸ Writers like Hencken and Bloch relied heavily upon linguistic evidence to prove the idea that Etruscan language had originated elsewhere. Subsequent scholars have downplayed the importance of the linguistic approach. Pallottino summarized a long history of attempts to relate Etruscan to countless other languages, often with disastrous results. Barker and Rasmussen go a step further and dismiss foreign influence on Etruscan language entirely: “But certainly we must assume that people were speaking a version of the language at least during the Villanovan period.”⁴⁹ They give no reason for this assertion, which demonstrates the fundamental weakness of the autochthonists’ argument: they have yet to deal satisfactorily with the issue of Etruscan language.

In recent years, scholars like John H. Cooper have resurrected etymology and have reaffirmed, it seems, the “eastern” hypothesis. In a series of articles, Cooper argues that Etruscan can in fact fit into the Indo-European family of languages if it is seen as a Creole form of Greek. Cooper also uses the Kaminia Stele on Lemnos to further his argument. He sees many striking similarities between the inscriptions in Etruria and on Lemnos. Both these languages have apparent borrowings from eastern languages, like Lydian and Hittite. While Pallottino states that the only resemblances between the Etruscan and Lydian languages is the use of certain characters and the enclitic “c,” Cooper argues that there are other similarities, particularly in

religious vocabulary.⁵⁰ Cooper also demonstrates Etruscan borrowing from the Anatolian language of Hittite, thus reinforcing the eastern origin of Etruscan. Cooper brings up an important component to the argument which is not addressed in any previous scholarship. He argues that there is a crucial “absence of clear dialectical distinctions between the Etruscan inscriptions scattered throughout their wide territory in northern and central Italy.” This uniformity suggests that the language had been introduced only a short time before it was first written down in 700 BC. This argument is critical when one thinks of the implications for the “autochthonous” theory. If the Etruscans were indeed completely autochthonous, then there would be more variety in the development of their language and dialects.

Cooper’s subsequent research has found that Etruscan and Lemnian, in addition to being very similar to each other, are in fact part of the Anatolian-Indic branch of the Indo-European family. Lemnian and Etruscan most likely came from the same Pelasgian source, though they began to develop independently by 800 BC, when the Etruscans had settled in Italy.⁵¹ Barker and Rasmussen argue that while the “Lemnos inscription has provided invaluable grist to the mill for those looking for Etruscan origins in the eastern Mediterranean,” the inscription dates over a century later than the first Etruscan inscriptions in Etruria. They argue that it could logically be used to argue that Etruscans did the colonizing, not the other way around!⁵² Yet this does not negate the idea that the Etruscans shared an original language with the Lemnians that came from the east. Linguistic evidence has thus resuscitated the debate between the “autochthonous” and “eastern” theses once more, and archaeologists have yet to adequately address this weakness in

their argument.

In addition to linguistic evidence, historical evidence continues to be used to support the “eastern” thesis. Many articles, including many for public consumption, still propagate the Herodotean idea of the Etruscans coming from Lydia. Annie Dillard, in her article about Etruscan lost culture, states rather flippantly that the Etruscans “rolled in from Lydia in Asia Minor and built up a culture 2,700 years ago.”⁵³ She goes on to list the traditional misrepresentations of Etruscan language and its supposed indecipherability, which Pallottino debunked nearly thirty years before her article! It seems that Etruscology still has the difficult task of removing the veil of mystery from the Etruscan civilization. Countless discarded articles and moth-eaten monographs demonstrate the dangers in employing only one method of research to such a varied and nuanced topic. As technology improves, new methodologies will assist greatly in the search to illuminate the Etruscans.

The most recent advancements in Etruscology have been in the field of genetics. John Bryan Ward-Perkins, in his commentary on the problem of Etruscan origins, suggested the use of genealogy as a means to determine the origins of the Etruscans, but no extensive work was done until many years later.⁵⁴ Analysis of genetic data in modern populations arose as a powerful tool for reconstructing crucial aspects of human evolutionary history and tracing the origins of ancient peoples.⁵⁵ In 1993, a preliminary study of the mitochondrial DNA pattern of modern Tuscans in the region of Siena was performed. The results indicated a long history of similarity with other Caucasian populations rather than unusual genetic patterning.⁵⁶ In addition,

there was a lack of evidence in skeletal material for significant differences between Etruscans and the people living in Etruria before them, or between Etruscans and their neighbors, or even between Etruscans and their successors in this part of Italy. Thus Barker and Rasmussen used this evidence to support the “autochthonous” theory.

However, genealogical evidence has since challenged the tenets of the autochthonists. Despite the confidence archaeologists have in the theory, paleoanthropological studies have shown only broad similarities between the Etruscans and their Iron Age neighbors.⁵⁷ Archaeological evidence suggests that Etruscan culture developed locally, with some Eastern influences. However, it is not clear that this influence reflects only trading and cultural exchange or a shared biological ancestry.⁵⁸ Just last year, Christiano Vernesi along with several colleagues sought genealogical answers to this question. They performed the first large-scale investigation into the DNA of the ancient Etruscans: “This is the first large-scale study of a pre-Roman European population in which all the strictest criteria for the validation of ancient DNA sequences have been followed.”⁵⁹ Scientists tested eighty skeletons from ten different Etruscan necropoleis. These samples were then compared to different ethnic groups. They found that while the Etruscans are similar to modern Italian populations, “they show closer relationships both to North Africans and to Turks than any contemporary population.”⁶⁰ They go on to say that the Etruscan gene pool “contains an excess of haplotypes suggesting evolutionary ties with the populations of the southern and eastern Mediterranean shores.”⁶¹ It appears that the “eastern” thesis does have more firepower left, and it will be interesting to see how new developments

in science affect the accepted thesis of the Etruscans as an autochthonous people.

The question of the origins of the Etruscans is not an easy one. In order to answer the question fully, one must employ a wide range of methods, from linguistics to archaeology to genealogy. Despite the recent attacks on Herodotus, the source tradition should still serve at least as a complement to other research. While the “autochthonous” theory is the most widely accepted today, there are still many problems that need to be worked out before it can be completely accepted and applied to Etruscan culture. At the same time, however, one must not get caught up in the apparent mystery of the Etruscans and get lost in the seeming fruitless search to find their origins. David Ridgway, in his preface to Pallottino’s work, summed up the search for the origins of the Etruscans in an unconventional way: “The general public,” he argues, “wants the Etruscans to be mysterious,” and the past literature has largely given the people what they want. Library shelves are filled with books about the “death-worshipping Etruscans bringing their indecipherable language from the notoriously mysterious East.”⁶² While this may have been the attitude of the past, there are several ongoing investigations seeking to truly unravel the riddles surrounding the Etruscan people.

The Etruscans are not as mysterious as they once were. Few scholars would dispute that, whatever the origins of the Etruscan people or the Etruscan language, “the historical Etruscan civilization as we know it took shape on Italian soil” even if the people responsible for its formation came from elsewhere. The Etruscans did not arrive “ready-made.”⁶³ New archaeological finds, new interpretations of evidence, and new methodologies have

all contributed to our deeper understanding of the Etruscans, and they will continue to do so. The Etruscans cannot remain mysterious forever, and with continued study, scholars may finally discover the true origins of this elusive people.

Endnotes

¹ Strabo 5.2.2.

² Pallottino, Massimo. *The Etruscans*, 7th ed. Trans. J. Cremona, English 2nd ed. Edited by David Ridgway. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975, 32.

³ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 1011-16.

⁴ Bloch, Raymond. *The Etruscans* (Ancient Peoples and Places, ed. Glyn Daniel, vol.7). London: Thames and Hudson, 1958, 53.

⁵ Quoted in Bloch, 53.

⁶ Pallottino, 65.

⁷ Pallottino, 65.

⁸ Taylor, Isaac. *Etruscan Researches*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1874, 3.

⁹ Pallottino, 66.

¹⁰ Pallottino, 66.

¹¹ Pallottino, 39.

¹² Hencken, Hugh. *Tarquinia and Etruscan Origins* (Ancient Peoples and Places, ed. Glyn Daniel, vol. 62). New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968, 158.

¹³ Bloch, 54.

¹⁴ Quoted in Bloch, 54.

¹⁵ Pallottino, 32.

¹⁶ Bloch, 53.

¹⁷ Bloch, 54.

¹⁸ Pallottino, 66.

¹⁹ Bloch, Raymond, 53.

²⁰ Bloch, 53.

²¹ The following discussion surrounding the similarities between Lydian and Etruscan can be found in Bloch, 55-56.

²² Bloch, 55.

²³ Bloch, 56.

²⁴ Bloch, 58.

²⁵ Bloch, 60.

²⁶ Bloch, 60.

²⁷ Bloch, 61.

²⁸ Richardson, Emeline. *The Etruscans: Their Art and Civilization*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964, 5.

²⁹ Richardson, 5.

³⁰ Pliny the Elder 3.5.50.

³¹ Richardson, 5.

³² Leighton, Robert. *Tarquinius: An Etruscan City* (Duckworth Archeological Histories, ed. Thomas Harrison) London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 2004, 25.

³³ Pallottino, 64.

³⁴ Pallottino, 66.

³⁵ Bloch, 64.

³⁶ “But they declared themselves to be Lydians.” Herodotus seems to be separating himself from this statement by using the third person plural as opposed to his declarative first person singular.

³⁷ Quoted in Ridgway, David. "The "Lydian Origins" of the Etruscans." Review of *L'Origine Lydienne des Etrusques: Histoire de la Doctrine dans l'Antiquite*, by Dominique Briquel. *The Classical Review*, New Series, Vol. 43, No.1 (1993): 109-110, 109.

³⁸ Barker, Graeme and Tom Rasmussen. *The Etruscans*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, 44.

³⁹ Barker and Rasmussen, 83.

⁴⁰ Barker and Rasmussen, 44.

⁴¹ Barker and Rasmussen, 60.

⁴² Torelli, Mario. "The Etruscan City-State." In *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Cultures: An Investigation*. Ed. Mogens Herman Hansen. Copenhagen: Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2000: 189-208, 190.

⁴³ Torelli, 190-1.

⁴⁴ Torelli, 192.

⁴⁵ Torelli, 195.

⁴⁶ Leighton, 44.

⁴⁷ Barker and Rasmussen, 83.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Barker and Rasmussen, 81.

⁴⁹ Barker and Rasmussen, 81.

⁵⁰ Cooper, "Etruscan Viewed as a Greek Creole Language." *Mankind Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Fall 1999): 79-94, 90.

⁵¹ Cooper, John H. "Etruscan and Lemnian Appear to be Twigs of the Pelasgian Branch of the Indo-European Language Tree." *Mankind Quarterly*. Vol. 40, Issue 4 (Summer 2000): 421-433, 11.

⁵² Barker and Rasmussen, 81.

⁵³ Dillard, Annie. "Etruscans, Losing Their Edge." *The American Scholar*. Vol. 73, Issue 2

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⁵⁴ Ward-Perkins, John Bryan. "The Problem of Etruscan Origins: Some Thoughts on Historical Method." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Vol. 64 (1959): 1-26, 7.

⁵⁵ Vernesi, Christiano et al. "The Etruscans: A Population Genetic Study." *American Journal of Human Genetics*. Vol. 74 (2004): 694-704, 694.

⁵⁶ Cenetti, Quoted in Barker and Rasmussen, 82-83.

⁵⁷ Vernesi et al. "The Etruscans: A Population-Genetic Study." *American Journal of Human Genetics*. Vol. 74 (2004): 694-704, 694.

⁵⁸ Vernesi, 694.

⁵⁹ Vernesi, 703.

⁶⁰ Vernesi, 701.

⁶¹ Vernesi, 71.

⁶² Ridgway, David. Quoted in the preface to the second English edition of Pallottino, 20.

⁶³ Ward-Perkins, 9.

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