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Etruscan Origins

The Etruscans existed in Italy from the 10th century BCE until their defeat by and integration into the Roman Empire by the first century BCE. Before the 8th century, Etruscan was not written and because of this, many early scholars thought the peoples living in Etruria at that time were a separate culture dubbed the Villanovans. Most scholars now believe that the Villanovans and the Etruscans are the same culture, separated only by the innovation of writing of their language.1 There is a debate as to where the Etruscans came from. Did they colonize Etruria, leaving their homeland in Lydia? Were the Etruscans the original inhabitants of Italy? Were they invaders from the North? The most plausible origin of the Etruscans is that a group of people from the Near East invaded or colonized Etruria and then intermarried with a group of native Italians some time before the Indo-European languages spread into the area. Over time, those people became Villanovans and then the Etruscans.

Herodotus’ Lydian Origins

The earliest person to reference the origins of the Etruscans was Herodotus. In his Histories, he explains that the Etruscans, as he believes, originated in Lydia. Herodotus describes how the Lydians were experiencing a terrible famine, and in order to alleviate his people’s

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suffering, the king split the population in two and sent half to colonize Etruria.\(^2\) When they reached the Etruria, they decided that they should no longer be called Lydians, and they took the name of their leader Tyrrhenus and so called themselves Tyrrhenians, the Greek name for the Etruscans.\(^3\)

There is some evidence to support Herodotus’ assertion that the Etruscans came originally from Lydia. One of the major supporting evidences for this claim is found within the DNA of Bos taurus (domestic cattle) from Italy and the Near East. Once domesticated, cattle are dependent on humans, and thus if the domesticators of the Bos taurus migrate, the cattle would migrate with them.\(^4\) When researchers investigating cattle around the Mediterranean examined the Mitochondrial DNA of Bos taurus, they found that many of the cattle in modern Tuscany were more closely related to cattle in the Near East than to cattle in the other parts of Italy.\(^5\) The researchers also investigated humans from modern Tuscany and the Near East. In doing so, they found that the modern inhabitants of Tuscany had genetic contributions from Near East populations.\(^6\) This makes a strong case for the Lydian origin because, though the human populations of modern Tuscany may have changed since Etruscan times, it is unlikely that the cattle populations have changed, since the current breeds of cattle in Tuscany match the breeds mentioned in Columella’s *Des rustica*.\(^7\)

Other support for the Lydian claim is found in the burial rights of western Anatolians. The early Villanovans cremated their dead and buried their urns in deep pits “cut into the earth or

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\(^2\) Hdt 1.94.
\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Ibid.
rock and protected [them] by stone containers.”

In the Iasos cemetery in southwestern Anatolia, “all of the tombs are stone cists.” Unlike the early Villanovan tombs, the Iasos cemetery employed inhumation instead of cremation. However, it is possible that the cremation rites came from the native Italians, or it is also possible that because other western Anatolians practiced cremation, the Anatolian-Etruscans took their cremation rites from other parts of Anatolia. However, a third possibility is that stone ossuaries are simply common in the ancient Mediterranean and that there is no real connection between Anatolian and Etruscan ossuaries.

During the Orientalizing period, the stone ossuaries gave way to tumuli. Tumuli are found throughout western Anatolia most notably, the tomb of Alyattes, built in the 7th century BCE.

However, there is a problem in using the tumuli for evidence for the Lydian claim. Firstly, tumuli are found all around the Mediterranean and other places where Indo-Europeans had settled. Since the Etruscans started building tumuli during the Orientalizing period, it is possible that the Etruscans adopted tumuli building after they were introduced to Indo-Europeans. Because the Etruscans were sailing in this period, it is possible that they brought the ideas of tumuli constructing back to Etruria after visiting other tumuli. Another problem with

8 Haynes, pp. 6, 11.
10 Ibid.; Haynes, pp. 5-6.
12 Haynes, pp. 71-84.
15 Phoenicians never built tumuli, and their ancestors, the Canaanites built cairns that were nothing like the tumuli of the Etruscans, see Ilan, David. "Mortuary Practices in Early Bronze Age Canaan." Near Eastern Archaeology 65.2 (2002): 92-104. JSTOR. Web. 15 Apr. 2012.: The Greeks rarely built tumuli, so it is unlikely that they learned tumuli building from the Greeks.
the tumuli evidence is that tumuli are found in numerous places around the world and there could be no connection between Etruscan and Lydian tumuli.16

Dionysius of Halicarnassus mentions more problems for the Lydian origin of the Etruscans. A contradiction he sees is that the Etruscans called themselves Rasenna not Tyrrenians after Tyrrenus like Herodotus said.17 Furthermore, Xanthus of Lydia, who Dionysius says is an expert in ancient Lydia, did not know about a king named Tyrrenus or a Lydian expedition to Italy.18 Dionysius says that the Etruscans and the Lydians speak different languages.19 He explains that other colonies of Lydia speak different dialects of the same language and that if the Etruscans were a colony, they would at least speak a similar language.20

In their book, *The Etruscan Language: An Introduction*, Giuliano and Larissa Bonfante explain that Lydian is an Indo-European language and Etruscan is not.21

Dionysius mentions that the Etruscans and the Lydians have different gods.22 Herodotus claims that Lydian customs are similar to the Greek customs.23 If Herodotus is to be believed, one can suppose that their religions were somewhat similar. The Roman religion was an Indo-European religion, like the Greek and probably the Lydian religions, but it was influenced by the Etruscans. Pallottino explains that the Etruscans had a belief system that was a form of animism.24 Many of their deities did not have a physical form and they were just forces, this idea

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17 D.H. 1.30.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 D.H. 1.28.
21 Bonfante, Giuliano, and Larissa Bonfante. *The Etruscan Language: An Introduction*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983. pp. 41-42.; I am not a linguist, and I could not find any linguistic comparisons of Lydian and Etruscan in order to further this argument. For evidence that it is not Indo-European, see Chart 1.
23 Hdt. 1.94.
was spread to the Romans and became their *genius*.\(^{25}\) Some of the Etruscans’ most important gods did have an anthropomorphized form, but when they met the Greeks with their personified gods, they combined them or adopted the new Greek gods as their own.\(^{26}\) One major difference between the Greco-Roman world, which because of Herodotus’ claim of similar cultures I will include Lydia, and the Etruscan world is “that whereas [the Greco-Romans] believe lightning to be released as a result of the collision of clouds, [the Etruscans] believe that clouds collide so as to release lightning.”\(^{27}\)

Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ Autochthonic Origins

In the first century BCE, Dionysius of Halicarnassus gave his own theory as to the origins of the Etruscans. Dionysius argues that because it does not make sense for the Etruscans to have migrated from Lydia and because the Etruscans have nothing in common with any other nation that he knew of, the Etruscans must have been native to Etruria.\(^{28}\) As Dionysius believed, the Etruscans were very old, even in his own time.\(^{29}\) “Some archaeologists…recognize the ancestors of…historical Etruscans in the inhabitants of central Italy even before the Villanovan period,” which would mean that the Etruscans were at least nine hundred years old when Dionysius was writing about them.\(^{30}\) Because the Etruscans did not write for at least two hundred years, it would make them seem to be rather old for Dionysius, possibly so old that they may have always been there. The Etruscan language must have been spoken in Etruria for an extended period of time before it was written in the 8\(^{th}\) or 7\(^{th}\) century.\(^{31}\) The Etruscan language has many words taken

\(^{25}\) Ibid.

\(^{26}\) Pallottino, pp. 160.

\(^{27}\) Pallottino, pp. 168., Quoting, Sen. *Quaest. Nat.* 2.32.2

\(^{28}\) D.H.1.30.

\(^{29}\) Ibid.

\(^{30}\) Bonfante, Giuliano, and Larissa Bonfante, pp. 7-8.

from Greek and from Italic languages.\textsuperscript{32} In addition, one can see how Etruscan words were
adopted/adapted for Latin.\textsuperscript{33} The fact that there was a two-way exchange of influence means that
these languages were residing near to each other for a long time.\textsuperscript{34} There is one considerable
problem with the autochthonic origin theory, and that is the question of how the areas under
Etruscan influence managed to keep their original pre-Indo-European language after the Indo-
European settlements for so long when nearly everywhere else in Europe fell into the Indo-
European hegemony?\textsuperscript{35}

The Lemnian Connection

There is a predicament in the question of Etruscan origins. Strabo claims that Anticleides
said, “that [the Etruscans] were the first to settle the regions round about Lemnos and Imbros,
and indeed that some of [them] sailed away to Italy with Tyrhenus the son of Atys.”\textsuperscript{36} The
interesting thing about this is that because Etruscan is a language isolate, there are no languages
related to Etruscan found anywhere except on a stele and on potsherds found on the island of
Lemnos in the Aegean.\textsuperscript{37} The stele was dated to the late sixth century BCE, and due to the
potsherds, it is unlikely that the stele was imported, which means that a dialect closely related to
Etruscan was spoken on Lemnos before the Athenians conquered it later in the century.\textsuperscript{38} Some
archaeologists have suggested that the stele and potsherds were remnants from Etruscan pirates,
who had been separated several generations before that settled there, based on linguistic analysis

\textsuperscript{32} Bonfante, Larissa, pp. 12.; e.g. (Etruscan-pruχum, pruχś, prucuna [Greek-πρόχυς] pitcher), (Etruscan-cletram
[Umbrian-kletra] basin, basket, cart for offerings), and (Etruscan-neftś, nefś, nefiś [Latin-nepos] nephew) nephew).
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.; e.g. (Etruscan-athre [Latin-atrium] building).
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Pallottino, pp. 66.
\textsuperscript{36} Strab. 5.2.4.
\textsuperscript{37} Bonfante, Larissa, pp. 11.; Pallottino, pp. 50, 236.; Bonfante, Giuliano, and Larissa Bonfante, pp. 40, 50-1, 61.,
Haynes, 1.
\textsuperscript{38} Bonfante, Larissa, pp. 11.
of the inscriptions.\textsuperscript{39} In the fourth book of his \textit{History of the Peloponnesian War}, Thucydides mentions that the majority population of the Acte peninsula are “Pelagians (descended from the Etruscans who once inhabited Lemnos and Athens).”\textsuperscript{40} This seems unlikely due to the lack of Etruscan language inscriptions from the area. This also seems like Thucydides is getting the Etruscans confused with the Pelasgians, who were often confused, but never the same peoples, according to Dionysius of Halicarnassus.\textsuperscript{41}

In Strabo’s \textit{Geography}, he mentions that the Etruscans were fierce pirates.\textsuperscript{42} This shows that the Etruscans were a sea faring people and could have settled on Lemnos from wherever they originated. It seems likely that since the Lemnians did not write before the sixth century, even though they were much closer to both Greeks and Phoenicians who had alphabets that they were not on the island for a very long time before they were conquered by the Athenians.

If the early Etruscans were pirates as Strabo states, it is possible that they or their ancestors were the Trš.w (Teresh) found in Egyptian hieroglyphics explaining an attempted invasion between 1230 and 1170 BCE.\textsuperscript{43} Because the Teresh wear a headdress similar to the Hittites in the Egyptian images, G.A. Wainwright argues that the Tyrrhenians/Tyrsenoi were the Teresh and that the Etruscans originally came from Anatolia.\textsuperscript{44} However, this would only work if archaeologists found Etruscan-like writing in Anatolia, or one accepts that when they migrated, the proto-Etruscans adopted the language of the native pre-Indo-European Italians.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item[39] Haynes, 2.
  \item[40] Thuc. 4.109.
  \item[41] D.H.1.29.
  \item[42] Strabo 5.2.2.
  \item[43] For details on the hieroglyphics only, Pallottino, pp. 66.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Theories of Northern Migration

During the nineteenth century, new theories of Etruscan origins were theorized. They were based on the similarity of the names “Rasenna” and “Raetian,” and findings of cremation cultures in Northern Europe and the discovery of pre-Villanovan cremations in the Terramarran culture in northern Italy.\(^4\) They theorized that the northern European cremation cultures travelled south over the Alps and into Italy to become the Terramarran, who would eventually become the Etruscans.\(^5\) These theories have now been proven to be incorrect and thus they will be ignored.\(^6\)

Modern theories and the Italian Soil Origin

Both the Lydian and Autochthonic origins for the Etruscans have their own positive and negative elements, which allow one to neither completely neither accept nor disregard either. What is known for sure is that at some point before the Roman domination of the Etruscans, settlers from the Near East came to Etruria with their cattle and began to live there. At some point either before or after the Near Eastern settlers arrived, cremation was and stayed the preferred method of burial rites. For some reason during the Orientalizing period, the wealthy Etruscans started entombing their dead within tumuli complexes. This may be a mark of original thinking within the Etruscan world, it might be a hearkening back to a foreign past, or it could be the Etruscans copying other civilizations’ burial rites for some reason. At the start of the Orientalizing period, the Etruscans adopted/adapted the Greek alphabet for their own language, which they had been speaking in the area for a long time. Over time loan words from the surrounding languages and Etruscan were traded. At some point, a variant of the Etruscan

\(^4\) Pallottino, pp. 67.
\(^5\) Pallottino, pp. 63-4.
\(^6\) Bonfante, Larissa, pp. 8.
language found its way to Lemnos and was spoken there for at least few generations before the island was conquered by the Athenian empire.

The Etruscans were a civilization “that sprung up from the soil of Italy.” Their culture was born in Italy from Near Eastern herders intermarrying with the native Italians of Etruria. They had a long and complex history that may never be completely unraveled. They appear to have influenced and been influenced in many ways by their neighbors. The Etruscans are an Italian people in the most original way. They are Italian, but not Italic.
Chart 1. Comparative Word Chart.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indo-European words</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Latin</th>
<th>Greek</th>
<th>Sanskrit</th>
<th>Etruscan</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>father</td>
<td>pater</td>
<td>pātēr</td>
<td>pitā</td>
<td>Apa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother</td>
<td>māter</td>
<td>mātēr/mēter</td>
<td>mātā</td>
<td>Ati</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>son</td>
<td>fīlius</td>
<td>Hyiós</td>
<td>sunūh</td>
<td>Clan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daughter</td>
<td>filia</td>
<td>Thygātēr</td>
<td>duhitā</td>
<td>Sech</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>wife</td>
<td>mulier</td>
<td>gynē</td>
<td>gnā</td>
<td>Puia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother</td>
<td>frāter</td>
<td>(phrātēr)</td>
<td>bhrātā</td>
<td>Ruva</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeus/Jupiter</td>
<td>Dies (piter)</td>
<td>Zeús patēr</td>
<td>Dyaūs pitā</td>
<td>Tinia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dies (piter)</td>
<td>louis, Iu(ppiter)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>(lucumō) Lauchum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>king</td>
<td>rēx, rēgis</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>rājā</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>god</td>
<td>deus</td>
<td>theós</td>
<td>devāḥ</td>
<td>Ais</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one</td>
<td>oinis, ūnus</td>
<td>ofnē</td>
<td>é(kah)</td>
<td>Thu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>two</td>
<td>duo</td>
<td>dýo</td>
<td>dvā</td>
<td>zal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>three</td>
<td>trēs</td>
<td>treīs</td>
<td>trāyah</td>
<td>ci</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>four</td>
<td>quattor</td>
<td>téttaraes</td>
<td>čatvārah</td>
<td>ša</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>five</td>
<td>quīnque</td>
<td>pénte</td>
<td>pāñča</td>
<td>mach</td>
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<tr>
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<td>decem</td>
<td>déka</td>
<td>dáśa</td>
<td>šar</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: These words were chosen by Bonfante to show the dissimilarity of words in Etruscan and Indo-European languages.