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Review of The Etruscans. A Very Short Introduction.

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The Etruscans. A Very Short Introduction, by CHRISTOPHER SMITH. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-19-954791-3; 148 pages; 17 illustrations.

Reviewed by LARISSA BONFANTE, New York University

The very successful series of Very Short Introductions now includes a booklet on the Etruscans written by a Roman historian who, as Director of the British School at Rome and next-door neighbor of the Etruscan Museum at Villa Giulia, is in a favored position to keep up with the latest conferences, controversies, lectures, and discoveries. The series format calls for extreme brevity, a bit of Further Reading and an Index. In this volume the author was allowed to have illustrations – there are 17 of them, including useful maps of Italy and Etruria and of some of the cities, all of them in sober black and white, but important in that they remind the reader that most of the evidence for the Etruscan past is archaeological and visual.

The book is organized into twelve brief chapters, the first dealing with the question of the origin of the Etruscans, and the second on the closely related subject of the language. The origin of the Etruscans has gained new strength since a study of the DNA of Turkish populations was said to bring a new kind of evidence to bear on the subject. The recent book edited by Vincenzo Bellelli (2014) includes a great deal of modern discussion.

The origin of the people who lived in central Italy between the Arno and the Tiber is not a mystery for archaeologists, who can trace the development of settlements into great cities for over a thousand years, 1200–100 BCE. In the course of time, there was also much interchange of ideas and technologies with their closest neighbors, the Latins and other neighbors in Italy. But for linguists the fact that their non-Indo-European language and religion were quite different from those of any one else's remains a problem. The area may have been left as an island when the Indo-Europeans came down from the north, bringing with them their male weather gods, their language and a certain social structure (Latin *rēx* 'king' and Sanskrit *rājā* 'king'). It may also mean that, as in America, there were different peoples that came together, and the language finally adopted, for historical reasons no longer clear to us, was that of a foreign elite. The Basques, too, kept their own language; but the Etruscans were not hidden in the mountains – they had, and kept, vast fertile fields and some of the best harbors in the Mediterranean. In antiquity, as Smith reminds us, there were different theories about the origin of the Etruscans. According to Herodotus' Lydian theory they came from the East, in huge boatloads like the later Greek colonization. According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who was anxious to show that the Romans were not *barbaroi*, but indeed a Greek city, the Etruscans

were autochthonous. As Elias Bickerman noted (1952: 65–81; cf. Gabba 1987: 10, 34, 135), each of these historians had his own agenda.

The chapter on language packs a great deal of information in a mere five pages, which include a table of alphabets and a muddy grey photo of the Pyrgi tablets (drawings, which would be more useful, could perhaps be substituted in future editions). An important paragraph briefly discusses recent work on names and the development of the gentilicial system.[1] After the eighth century BCE and the move to urbanized foundations, individuals no longer had only one name (to which could be added their father's name or patronymic). Men – and women, but not slaves – had both a praenomen and a family name to distinguish them socially, and to facilitate recording family relationships and inheritance of property. A glance at the most interesting of the 28 Etruscan–Latin bilingual epitaphs, in which Laris Cafatius, son of Laris, names his profession in beautiful Latin letters as *haruspex, fulguriator*, and in Etruscan as *trutnvt frontac*, tells of a period when bilingualism was an option, before the end of the Etruscan language in favor of the more prestigious and useful Latin.

Historical sections follow. Chapter Three, on the development of the city-state, deals with archaeological discoveries that illustrate a variety of developments in Italy in the Bronze Age. For this period, the author looks northward: "Frattesina [in the Veneto region, by the north east Alpine passes] is hugely important as a link between the late Bronze Age and the Iron Age, and it gives a hint as to the international opportunities and the potential markets and economic interactions which underpinned the transformation in early Iron Age Etruria" (p. 24).

In Chapter Four, dedicated to the Villanovan revolution, maps of Tarquinia, Cerveteri, and Veii in the south, Spina on the Adriatic, and Marzabotto on the northern border of the Etruscan world, illustrate the development of these great Etruscan cities, all of which have their roots in the Iron Age transformation. A remarkable survey of archaeological excavations underpins this section, which looks at the changes in Italy in a chronological and geographical background.

Chapter Five, "The Transformation of Etruria," looks at the interesting case of Verucchio, whose settlement and necropolis lasted from the 9th to the 6th centuries. No inscriptions were found at the site. Like Frattesina in an earlier period (11th century), it looked northwards to the amber route. The grave goods, including much amber, and organic material, wood, and textiles, miraculously preserved by the special chemical conditions of the ground, shows the wealth that the northern trade generated. In contrast, the principal trace element with the Greeks is their pottery; and any visit to a major museum shows, as much as 90% of Greek pottery was found

[1] An excellent example is Morandi Tarabelli 2004.

at Etruscan sites, Tarquinia, Cerveteri, Vulci, and other great cities. The chapter also looks at the arrival of the Greeks, Pithekoussai, natural resources, the Etruscans and the sea.

Chapter Six, on Etruscan tomb painting and Etruscan art, has four illustrations, and deals with bronze mirrors, gold jewelry, and the peculiarly artistic technique of bucchero pottery. Emphasizing the independence of Etruscan art, the author cites particularly enigmatic examples, the erotic images in the Tomb of the Bulls, the Tragliatella oinochoe. There are some nice observations: starting with the 5th and 4th centuries, artists express the divide between worlds more clearly. Sarcophagi and urns place the mythology clearly on the base, and keep the humans very human.

Chapter Seven, "Empire, Crisis, and Response, 600-300 BC," a historical tour de force, traces the warfare of the different cities, and the non-colonial thalassocracy of the Etruscans. The next section, Chapter Eight, surveys the abundant evidence for Etruscan religion, temples and sanctuaries, funeral and other rites, religious writings and the *etrusca disciplina*, divinities in Etruscan art, prophetic figures, the local pantheon and the influence of Greek mythology, belief in life after death. The author is up to date with the discoveries at Campo della Fiera at Orvieto, which have uncovered the site of the federal sanctuary and the site of the meetings of the Etruscan League. Also up to date are the references to the brontoscopic calendar and its references to difficult times, with plagues, revolts and disasters that weakened the confidence of the Etruscan cities (MacIntosh Turfa 2012). Chapter Nine, "The Roman Conquest," takes up the situation in the Etruscan cities after the fifth century crisis, when a new aristocracy came into power, and when the inland cities came to the fore with their agricultural prosperity, rather than the earlier international contacts of the southern cities. The section on the historical importance of Veii is particularly striking. For the Romans, the conquest of Etruria was part of their expansion in Italy, and the beginning of their broader drive to domination.

Chapter Ten, which was given the currently fashionable title, "Clothing and the Roman Body," has much to say about Etruscan women, citing Theopompus' scandalous account of Etruscan social and sexual customs, in which we can actually see a factual basis, however skewed by fourth-century Greek morality and prejudice. Chapter Eleven, "Imperial Epilogue," offers some interesting instances of continuity. And finally the last chapter looks at the past, present, and future of Etruscan studies.

Readers will enjoy this bird's eye view of the field by a historian. Many will even follow George Dennis in his exploration of the Etruscan countryside, where olives and grapes are still transformed into prized wine and olive oil, and where much is the same as in the days of the Etruscans, and of the artists of the Renaissance who found their inspiration there.

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