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R. S. P. Beekes. *The Origin of the Etruscans.*

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by Anne Mahoney

What if Herodotus was right, and the Etruscans actually did come from Lydia? Beekes argues that they did, but “Lydia” was not the same place as in Herodotus’ own day. It is a clever argument which accounts for various facts: the references to Tyrsenians in Asia Minor, the social changes in Etruria around the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, the Homeric name Meiones referring to the Lydians, and of course the Lemnos inscriptions. Beekes, an Indo-Europeanist, relies on evidence from literature, history, and linguistics.

Beekes’ theory is that the Etruscans originally lived in north-western Asia Minor, along with the Lydians. Around 1200 BC, as part of the general upheaval at this time, the Phrygians moved into this area, displacing the inhabitants. The Lydians went south, to the area where they are found in classical times; the Etruscans crossed the sea to Italy.

In fact, Beekes did not set out to answer the Etruscan question. He was instead curious about why the Lydians are called Meiones in Homer. The name Meiones seems to come from a place name which is Masas in Hittite texts, Maionia in Greek ones. But this is farther north in Asia Minor than the historical position of the Lydians. Herodotus says there is a connection between Maionians and Lydians, namely that the Maionians are colonists from Lydia (7.74). Beekes suggests that it is the other way around: that the people we know as Lydians lived originally in Maionia and only later moved south. This is consistent with various references in the *Iliad* and with the idea that Lydian is “the most deviating of the Anatolian languages” (p. 20), leaving aside Hittite. If it is different from the other languages of its family, it would be logical to expect it to be geographically distant, not central.

The argument here is mainly linguistic: can the Homeric name Meiones be connected with the place name Masas? Beekes observes (p. 11) that the eta in the Homeric

ethnonym must represent an original long ‘a,’ the same vowel as in the place name. To account for the disappearance of the ‘s,’ he compares Hittite “Wilusas” and Greek “Ilios” (or “Wilios” with initial digamma), also Hittite “Truisas” or “Taruisas” and Greek “Troia.” Although no one knows exactly why the ‘s’ disappears in the Greek forms, one plausible explanation is that it is part of a suffix, ‘-sa,’ and Greek has taken up the form without the suffix. If the same thing happened here, we should then have a Greek place name “Maia,” with a standard Greek suffix (p. 12). But we do not: we have “Maionia” for the place, fairly clearly derived from “Meiones” or “Maiones,” the name of the people living there. Beekes waves his hands just a bit here, but as he points out “It is quite improbable that in the same area two large countries existed of which the name began with ‘Ma-’” (p. 12), so Maionia and Masas are very likely the same.

If the Lydians are the Meiones, then, and Maionia is Masas, then at the time of the Trojan War the Lydians were in northern Asia Minor, not the central-southern region where they are found later. Beekes finds support for this idea in Herodotus 7.74, as noted above, in Strabo (12.8.3, 13.1.8), and perhaps also in the *Iliad* (2.866, 3.402, 18.291), though this is a bit of a stretch (p. 17). The passages in Herodotus and Strabo can be interpreted to suggest that the Lydians came from the north to their present (classical) position; Beekes proposes that these two texts are “dim recollections of a distant past” (p. 15), recording a tradition that neither Herodotus nor Strabo entirely understood. He further suggests that it was right around 1200 BC that they moved south, and connects this with the destruction of Sardes at that time: this city, later the Lydian capital, will have been destroyed by the Lydians themselves, arriving as invaders, driven out of their former territory by the Phrygians (p. 22).

Although some of the individual arguments are weak, others are not, and the volume of evidence collected here makes the case somewhat more plausible. I am willing to accept Beekes’ solution to the Lydian puzzle.

As Beekes describes it, he found a reasonable answer to his Lydian question, then realized almost by accident that this also solved the problem of Etruscan origins. (“Problem”? As Guiliano Bonfante puts it, “Linguists worry about Etruscan origins today far more than archaeologists do” (Bonfante, p. 43). For an Indo-Europeanist like Beekes, the presence of the Etruscan language among a handful of Italic languages in early Italy is a tantalizing puzzle.) If the Maionians are really the Lydians, and the Etruscans came from Lydia, then perhaps the Etruscans came from northern Asia Minor exactly where the Tyrsenians are later found.

During the disruptions of around 1200 BC, the Lydians and Tyrsenians were displaced, perhaps by Phrygians coming in from the north, and as we have seen, Beekes observes that this would account for the classical position of Lydia, far south of Troy. If some of the Tyrsenians sailed west, while others moved south and settled on the coast and on the islands off the coast, this would also account for the relationship between Etruscan and Lemnian: they would be sister languages, descended from the language they spoke as a unified people. In addition, this would explain the reference in Herodotus (1.57) to Plakia and Skylaka, two small villages said to speak “the same language as Kreston.” Beekes, following Briquel and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, emends to “Croton,” which

he takes to mean Cortona in Etruria: that is, according to Beekes, Herodotus means these two villages in northern Asia Minor speak Etruscan, or a closely related language (p. 38).

Beekes pulls together as many references as he can find to Etruscans, Tyrsenians, Lydians, and Maionians, mostly in Homer, Herodotus, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus. He has managed to form a single consistent hypothesis that accounts for nearly all of his references. He does admit that some of the arguments for his theory are rather weak, for example that the Tyrsenians appear in some lists of the “Sea Peoples” (p. 35) or that the Etruscans’ tradition that their civilization would last ten saecula, with sufficiently fuzzy arithmetic, can be made consistent with their arriving in Italy around 1200. This involves assuming that the saecula vary in length from 45 to 123 years, and that counting starts from a point roughly 200 years after their arrival: very arbitrary. (p. 34-35)

Beekes further acknowledges that there is no hard, material evidence to support his theory. He says, “Many scholars would like to see archaeological evidence, but I think that it is quite possible that we shall never find any” (p. 33). On the other hand, he observes that no one has looked for evidence of Etruscans in *northern* Asia Minor, or in the period just before 1200, and perhaps there may after all be something to be found.

Is Beekes right? Perhaps. His identification of the Lydians and the Maionians is certainly convincing. Whether this identification also accounts for the Etruscans is a bit more complicated. That the Tyrsenians in Asia Minor, the speakers of Lemnian, and the Etruscans in Italy are all originally the same people is an attractive idea, though of course not new here; Beekes does manage to account for their relationship.

A crucial part of Beekes’ argument, however, is that there is a significant cultural break in Etruria around 1200, at the beginning of the Early Bronze Age or Proto-Villanovan period (p. 34, citing Briquel and Torelli). The introduction of cremation can be dated to around this period, and there is also evidence for a new hierarchical social organization (convenient summary in Barker and Rasmussen, p. 53-60). Beekes simply says that there is a change, and changes of this sort can come about when new people move in to an existing society, so therefore this change is consistent with his theory. That is correct as far as it goes, but what is missing is any consideration of how and why people coming in from Asia Minor would cause the particular changes that take place in Etruria. Can we argue that the society of the pre-migration Tyrsenians was hierarchical in the same way as those of the various Indo-European-speaking peoples in the region? Beekes simply says “what we still would like to have is material objects, or art traditions etc., from Etruria agreeing with their homeland” (p. 34). What we would really like to have is evidence for the organization of society in this alleged homeland.

The book has five chapters, three appendices, and seven addenda, as if Beekes continued adding to and refining his argument up until the last possible minute. This makes for somewhat disjointed reading, as the main text has frequent references not only to footnotes but to the appendices and addenda. Beekes seems thoroughly convinced by his argument, writing things like “It may be unnecessary to stress that this fact in itself definitely proves that the Etruscans came from Asia Minor, near Troy” (p. 50, referring to the possible identification of Tyrsenians and Pelasgians), or “the evidence that the Etruscans came from Asia Minor is overwhelming.... It is no longer possible to ignore the

evidence” (p. 36). As a rhetorical strategy, this leads the reader to wonder whether Beekes has the fervor of a recent convert, or else is using forceful language to distract attention from weak points in the argument.

In short, this is a thought-provoking exposition of a clever idea which accounts for most of the known facts and just might be true.

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