ETRUSCAN AND TUSCAN PARALLELS, A STUDY OF
THE ETRUSCAN CIVILIZATION AND OF THE
FLORENTINE RENAISSANCE

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PART ONE

The Italian region of Tuscany, once the heart of ancient Etruria, is a land of contrasts. The rocky eastern shores open to the mild winds of the Tyrrhenian sea, recede into a forest of black pine trees tempered by silvery tamerici shrubs and red sprays of oleanders. Golden clusters of broom overlooking the sea from barren cliffs are guarded by needled agave-cacti aimed at the sky like naked daghe—the deadly short sword the Romans inherited from the Etruscans.

Away from the sea the vegetation changes, but not in color. The black of the pine trees becomes the dark green of the fragrant laurels hiding behind garden walls. The silver of the tamerici becomes the shimmer of the olive trees scattered on low, terraced hills among even rows of grapevines. Slender cypresses climb the narrow paths in lonely procession like votive lamps set aglow by the last rays of the sun.

Tuscany is a land of harmony. The brightness of the wild flowers never clashes with the graceful solemnity of the landscape. Perhaps because of this natural propensity to subdue all excesses, Tuscany’s history is the history of spring. Like spring it has the feeling for essential values, like spring it has the seed of ideas, like spring it has the creativeness of youth. And this promise of creativeness became a reality during two historical cycles far apart, yet intimately related in their cultural development. The first spanned from the VI century B.C. to the IV century B.C. when Etruscan influence in Italy reached its peak; the second spanned from the XIII century A.D. to the XV century A.D. when Florence, then a prosperous Republic, became the center of the Italian Renaissance.

This presentation deals with the first part of this history: the Etruscan civilization in Italy.

In the first century B.C. Italy experienced two events of great importance. The first event was the rising of dictatorship within the Roman Republic that led to the formation of the Roman Empire, the second event was the hopeless fight of two Etruscan cities, Faesulae (Fiesole in Tuscany) and Perusia (Perugia in Umbria) to regain their freedom from Rome.
In the year 78 B.C. when the Roman leader Lucius Cornelius Silla was dead, Faesulae rebelled against the colonists left by Silla to punish the city for the help it had given his arch-enemy Gaius Marius. The rebellion was unsuccessful, it only worsened conditions for Faesulae. Within thirty-eight years, in 40 B.C. the city of Perusia suffered a much worse fate for aiding Lucius Antonius, the brother of Mark Anthony. Octavianus, the future Caesar Augustus, conquered the city and to commemorate the Ides of March ordered three hundred illustrious citizens put to death.⁷

These instances of rebellion in Faesulae and Perusia, are especially important because they mark the last attempt of any Etruscan city to regain political independence from Rome since the fall of Faleri Veteres (Civita Castellana) in 218 B.C.

During the Roman empire to facilitate administration, the central part of Etruria which included modern Tuscany, northern Latium and parts of Umbria, became known as Region VII. The Emperor Diocletianus (3 century A.D.) reorganized the Region VII into the districts of Tuscia and Umbria² with Florence as the most important city.

Except for these geographical informations which reached us through Latin texts, the Etruscans left very few traces of their civilization which became a mystery perhaps as great as the mystery of their provenience. The only documentation the Tusci, as the Latin called them or Tyrseni, as they were known to the Greeks left of their way of life³ is in the tombs or houses of the dead. where the walls come alive with frescoes depicting their activities and their diversions.

Who were the Etruscans and where did they come from? There are several theories concerning their origin and none can be honestly discarded for a lack of final, negative proof. Nicola Fréret⁴ associated the Etruscan word *Rasenna* (probably man or people) to Reti, a section of the Italian Alps still known as Alpi Retiche, forwarding the hypothesis that the Etruscans came from Northern Europe.

Dyonysus of Alicarnassus, historian of the Augustian era, claimed the Etruscans to be autochthonous because their language and customs did not resemble those of any other people in the Italian peninsula.

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⁸ Tuscia et Umbria correspond to the modern regions of Tuscany, with capital Florence, and Umbria, with capital Perugia.
⁹ Central Italy became known as Tuscia, Etruria, or Tuscany, from the name of Tusci which the Latins used for the Etruscans. Their Greek name Tyrseni probably derives from *Tyrsis* or turris meaning tower.
⁴ Nicola Fréret was a member of the *Academie D’Inscriptions et Belles Lettres de Paris* (1750).
Most Greek and Latin historians, however, believed the Etruscans came to Italy from Lydia in Asia Minor and Herodotus left a famous legend to describe their arrival. It seems that a famine which lasted eighteen years compelled the King of Lydia, Athis, to send away half of his people led by his son Tyrrenus. After a long journey by sea, Tyrrenus landed on the rocky shores of the Italian peninsula somewhere north of the future Rome, and here he sacrificed a native white pig to Tinia, Uni and Minerva, the three most important Etruscan Gods that the Romans were to adopt with the names of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva.

The Etruscans who were careful with numbers as they considered them an important part of their religious ceremonial, traced their historical beginnings to the XI century B.C., approximately between the years 1045 and 1025 B.C.\(^6\)

It is not until the VII century B.C. however, that we can speak of Etruria proper. The Etruscan civilization was in fact a by product of the peaceful integration of the local Umbrian-Sabellic populations with the followers of Tyrrenus. This process can be traced to the Villanovan cinerary urns where the transition from a cup or \textit{patera} covering the urn to a typical Etruscan helmet or to the clay model of the head of the deceased gives us the important data of this process of acculturation.

Thus the most complete political and artistic development of the Etruscan Dodecapolis or government of the twelve cities can be placed between the VI century B.C. when the Etruscans fully imposed their cultural supremacy in Italy, and the IV century B.C. when the rising power of Rome brought a slow death to the Dodecapolis.\(^5\)

The Etruscan cities were at first governed by some form of a primitive monarchy. The leading citizens of Etruria bore the name of \textit{Lucumones}, but identification between the word \textit{Lucumo} and king is becoming increasingly obsolete.

Between the VI century B.C. and the V century B.C. the Etruscan cities became republics united by a common religious bond.\(^7\)

It seems that the constant preoccupation of these republics was to decrease the power of the individual citizen in order to avoid

\(^{6}\) Among the Latin writers we can list Virgil, \textit{Aeneid}, Book 2, v 781; Book VIII, v 478; Book IX v 11. Also Horatius, Ovidius, Cicero, Seneca, Plinius, Tacitus. The related story above is found in Herodotus I, 94.

\(^{5}\) Varro gives us this information in his \textit{Tusculae Historiae}.

\(^{7}\) From Villanova a village near modern Bologna in Emilia.

\(^{5}\) The cities of the Dodecapolis at the time of Roman conquest were: Caere (Cerveteri), Tarquinii (Tarquinia), Vulci, Rusellae (Roselle), Vetulonia, Populonia, Volatinn (Bolsena), Ciusium (Chiusi), Arretium (Arezzo), Perusia (Perugia), Volaterrae (Volterra), Faesulae (Piesole), Cortona. Veii had already been destroyed by the Romans. All the twelve cities of the original dodecapolis were located in central Italy.

\(^{7}\) The twelve people of Etruria gathered every year at the sanctuary of the \textit{Fanum Volumniae} for religious celebrations.
tyranny. This steady mistrust that bordered on anarchy, generated such a hatred for all types of absolute power that when the city of Veii, which had reverted to a monarchy, was sieged by the Romans (396–386, B.C.) no sister city moved to its aid and Veii was completely destroyed.

This rebellion against authority, this exceeding gusto for self expression and individualism, is evident in Etruscan artistic manifestations of the golden period which spanned from about the VI century B.C. to the IV century B.C. Though greatly influenced by Greek art, Etruscan art at its best has a unique realism and psychological insight, especially evident in funerary statuary and animal sculpture.²⁹

In order to understand Etruscan realism in art is necessary to penetrate the profound implications of religion among the Rasenna. The Etruscans believed in a complete, fatalistic submission to the will of the Gods. This need for identification between their daily lives and a preconceived destiny, increased the importance of every action they performed during their stay on earth. The soul went to the underworld equipped with a scroll where its good deeds were registered for the final judgment. The deceased was escorted by a winged creature, a Lasa¹¹ who was to guarantee a safe journey.

Because the after life was intended as a mere continuation of life on earth, nothing could be more appealing to the Etruscans than the blue skies of their native Tuscia where through pirate ships and through great commercial skill they had created a veritable paradise on earth. While the Greeks translated religion into art, the Etruscans translated art into religion, religion into life, life into eternity.

This can be clearly seen in the Tomb of Hunting and Fishing in Tarquini (VI century B.C.). Here the walls become alive with agile dolphins leaping out of the Tyrrhenian sea, with birds cutting the skies like winged arrows, with brown naked men diving in the green waters.

Above them, in a different panel, husband and wife banquet on the kline, a reclining bed, attended by servants. The woman holds the affectionate hand over the chest of the spouse as if to affirm the very important place she holds in his heart. And indeed the Etruscan woman held a unique place in all the ancient world. She was allowed to take part in every type of amusement the men enjoyed.

The freedom allowed by Etruscan men to their women was often misinterpreted. The historian Ateneus (XII, pp. 517–518) writes

²⁹ Outstanding are the works of Vulca—the greatest of Etruscan sculptors. Especially notable are his Apollus and Mercury, both from Veii. Other important pieces of Etruscan statuary are Aule Metell and the Capitoline Brutus. In animal sculpture the Chimera from Arezzo and the Lupa Capitolina are wonderfully realistic.

¹¹ Lately scholars tend to identify the Lasa with the Lores of the Romans.
that Etruscan women "Lie on the kline not only with their husbands but also with strangers and have relations with anyone willing to do so." While Plautus, the Latin playwright in the Cistellaria (II, 3 v 20 etc.) calls prostitution, "The Etruscan way to acquire a dowry."

These misconceptions of Etruscan customs may be ascribed to the fact that both writers lived at a time when Rome was extremely proud of its Latin ancestry and regarded the early Etruscan influences on its civilization as a blemish on its past.

Life in Etruria as the murals in the tombs point out was largely given to entertainment. Most games we know through the Romans were of Etruscan extraction. Thus the games of the Gladiators were first played in Etruria and from there they spread to the South, to Campania, where the Romans learned them. The subulones or pipe players, so popular in Rome, were Etruscan, and so were most of the pantomime performers and the clowns. Acrobats and trick riders were also Etruscan and polo was one of their favorite games.

The Etruscans were masters in playing the double flute called tibia and legend wanted Athena to have invented the horn for their very special use. Ateneus tells us (XII, p. 518 b) "The Etruscans do every thing at the sound of music, they make pasta (noodles), they have fist fights, they whip people while listening to the flute."

Their homes were perhaps the most comfortable of ancient times. From the tombs we know the way these homes were built again because of the Etruscan tendency to see in the after life a continuation of the present. The houses were divided into three rooms of which the largest was the nuptial chamber to symbolize the importance of the wedded pair, therefore of the family unit.

The rooms were furnished with throne-like chairs, bucchero vases, bronze containers, candelabra, incense holders, kitchen knives, grills, colanders, even knapsacks. Toilette articles consisted of mirrors, safety pins which they called fibulae, scissors, depilators, short ivory sticks, and different types of brushes.

The jewelry was exquisite and abundantly used by the women who loved to wear heavy make up on their expressive faces crowned by the blonde hair and a pointed cap called tutulus. The make up was not limited to women. The Lucumones walked the streets of Rome wrapped in their tebennos, the future Roman toga, their faces painted in red to assert their proud masculinity.

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12 This can be seen in most murals of the VI, V century B.C. notably in the Tomb of the Augurs, Tomb of the Lioness, Tomb of the Baron, Tomb of the Triclinii, all in Tarquinii. Also in the Tomb of the Monkey in Chiusi.

13 Bucchero is a native black clay.

14 On their feet they wore the calcei repaudi, a pointed shoe of Tonic-Oriental origin.
The Etruscans controlled rain water by an opening on top of the house or *cumpluvium* which allowed the water to gather in a small pool at the center of the atrium. They also used a reclined roof that forced the water to slide on the sides of the house. This type of water drainage was called *displuvium* and is the kind still used today on the roof of modern homes.

The Etruscans were engineers of great skill being able to restore the swamp lands of Tuscany and Latium to cultivation and make them produce great quantities of wheat, linseed, olives, wood, and delicious grapes. The arch which they masterfully used in building bridges, aqueducts and city walls was an Etruscan architectural innovation of probable Oriental origin.

They worked metals, especially iron, with such intensity that the iron scraps they left on the shores of Poljulonia, across from the island of Elba, are still used today.

They were so skilled in medicine that a legend wanted the sons of the enchantress Circe to have found shelter in Etruria where they brought their medical craft. Chirurgical instruments such as bistoury, forceps, tweezers, have been found in different tombs to attest to their widespread use. Dentistry was highly developed in Etruscan times and gold teeth were not a rarity. We know this from a Roman law that forbade bodies to be buried with gold to discourage thieves. An exception was made for the gold in dental work, and the deceased could be buried *auro dentes juncti* or “with the gold that keeps the teeth together” inside the mouth.

The typical Etruscan infernal deity, Charu (Charon) was represented holding a hammer. The meaning was quick death—the mercy killing often inflicted by the Etruscans on their elders when gravely ill.

Charu and his hammer became predominant in Etruscan painting toward the end of the IV century B.C. During the years of Etruscan decadence, the after life became a nightmare of demons and horrible creatures as symbolized by the Las Tuchulcha—a winged monster with a beak-like nose and snakes winding around its hair and on its left arm.

The rising danger of the Romans in the south aggravated by the savage excursions of the Gauls in the north impoverished the Etruscans and drained their creative capabilities. Perhaps because of the stress they placed on the resemblance of their after life to everyday reality, they saw no reason for survival in a world ravaged by wars and in a home destroyed by tragedy and mourning. This re-

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13 The *Cloaca Massima* in Rome was built by the Etruscans under the Etruscan king Tarquinius Priscus.
14 See the *Odyssey* by Homer, Chapter 10. (Valgimigl Italian Translation).
fusil to survive, may be one of the reasons why their language is nearly completely unknown and seems destined to remain a secret forever.

According to the Romans the Etruscans left no noteworthy literary inheritance. Their only books\textsuperscript{17} were concerned with rituals and the way to carry them out properly. Possible interpretation of longer funerary inscriptions however, leads us to believe that the Etruscans had some form of elogia or dramatic poetry written to honor important deceased.

Whatever the case, the Etruscan language fell into complete disuse during the Roman Empire and the Etruscan civilization withdrew itself in the hidden tombs of the Lucomones in a world that in the darkness of the underground seemed to cry for a new chance to live under the limpid skies of beautiful Tuscany.

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\textsuperscript{17} Notably the \textit{Libri Haruspicini, Libri Fulgurales, Libri Rituales.}