

**CLA320H5**

**The Etruscans**

**Week 1**

# Today's class

1. Welcome and introductions
2. Contact Your Instructor!
3. Things you should know about this course
3. The Etruscans: name and geographical definition
4. The Etruscans: a chronological outline
5. Sources in EtruscoLOGY: archaeological sources and Greek/Latin texts
6. Etruscan language and writing

# Questions?

My door is always open! Choose from **four ways to connect:**

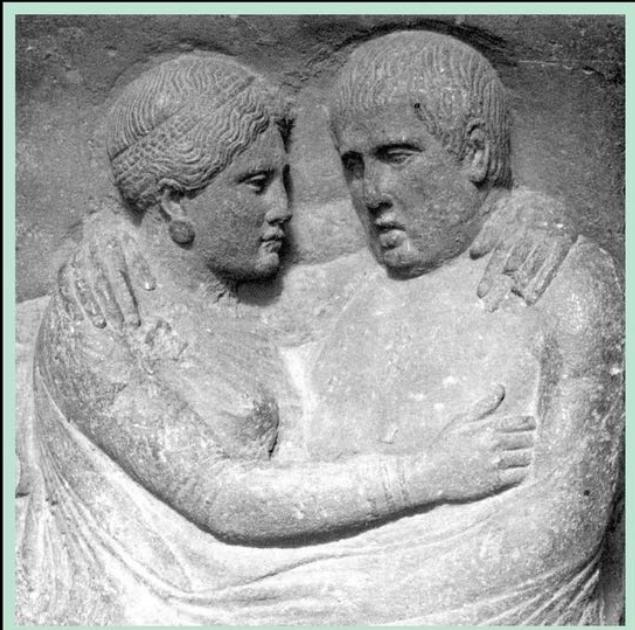
- ★ **Quick questions?** Talk to me after class on Tuesdays.
- ★ **Need more time?** Join my **office hours** on **Wednesdays at 3:10 –3: 55 PM**
- ★ Or book a dedicated Zoom appointment.
- ★ And of course, you can always email me!

My office is **Maanjiwe nendamowinan 4246.**

I'm here to help – please don't hesitate to reach out!

# The Etruscans

Graeme Barker and Tom Rasmussen



## Our Main Guide:

- **Barker & Rasmussen, *The Etruscans* (2000)**
-  **Appendix (pp. 297-328):** A fantastic, quick-reference guide to major Etruscan archaeological sites, all keyed to a map on p. 300. Your go-to for placing sites on the map!
-  **Bibliography (pp. 329-366):** An essential tool for your written assignments. Use it as a launchpad for your own research.



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# The Etruscans: their name...

- Greek: *Tyrsenoi* or *Tyrrhenoi* (>"Tyrrhenian Sea")
- Latin: *Etrusci* or *Tusci* (>"Tuscany")
- Etruscan: *Rasenna* ("the people")
- Etruscology: the study of the Etruscans
- Modern Populonia – Roman *Populonium* – Etruscan *Fufluna* (> Fufluns)
- Modern Volterra – Roman *Volaterrae* – Etruscan *Velathri*



Central Italy and principal Etruscan settlements  
→ Compare Barker&Rasmussen p. 2 fig. 1 and p. 15 fig. 4

## ... and geographical definition

- **Slide 4:** The principal area of the Etruscans: western central Italy. Its natural boundaries:
    - the Arno river to the north
    - the Tiber river to the south and east
    - the Tyrrhenian sea to the west
  - Expansion outside this area: into Campania to the south and the Po Valley to the north
  - Cities in Southern Etruria and Latium: on volcanic tuff plateaus (examples: Veii, Cerveteri, Tarquinia, Vulci, Orvieto: **slides 6–7**)
  - Cities in Central and Northern Etruria: on hills dominating the sea and inland waterways (examples: Populonia, Vetulonia, Volterra, Chiusi, Cortona, Arezzo)
- For a catalogue of Etruscan settlements, cf. Barker & Rasmussen pp. 297–328



View of the city of **Orvieto – Volsinii – Velzna**  
Cf. also Barker&Rasmussen p. 142 fig. 50.



**View of Orvieto**

# The Etruscans: a chronological outline

- Late and Final Bronze Age                    ca. 1300-1000/900 BCE
  - Early Iron Age (Villanovan)                ca. 1000/900-700 BCE
  - Orientalizing Period                        ca. 700-570 BCE
  - Archaic Period                                ca. 570-470 BCE
  - Classical Period                                ca. 470-300 BCE
  - Hellenistic Period                              ca. 300-31 BCE
- Cf. Barker & Rasmussen p. 6

## Some important dates:

- 474 BCE: battle of Cumae
- 396 BCE: Veii conquered by Rome
- 90 BCE: Inhabitants of Etruscan cities receive Roman citizenship

## Etruscan survivals in Roman culture, e.g.:

- The *haruspices*
- The *cognomen* of Publius Vergilius *Maro* likely derives from Etr. *maru*

# Sources in Etruscology: archaeological sources

- The archaeological record is valuable: it allows us to assess the geographical and cultural differences between Etruria's various regions. It also enables us to describe the change and development that took place within the nine centuries of Etruscan history. Still, approaching a civilization mainly based on the archaeological record poses certain challenges:
- Archaeological sources are frequently from funerary contexts, often of the wealthy elite (**funerary bias** and **social bias** of the evidence). However, an increasing influx of data from settlement, farm, port, and road excavation adds to our knowledge of Etruscan everyday life.
- Organic materials such as textiles and wood often have a short life, compared with artifacts made of durable material such as stone or fired clay (**conservation bias**).
- As the sites of many Etruscan cities remain inhabited until today (**settlement continuity**), their remains are inaccessible to archaeological excavation.
- The meaning of objects is rarely self-evident, and objects are open to many, and sometimes **conflicting, interpretations**. Sometimes, the **archaeological context** in which it was found can shed light on the function and meaning of an object.

# Sources in Etruscology: Greek and Latin texts

- Passages concerning the Etruscans in ancient Greek and Latin written sources are often **culturally biased**.
- Also, the Greek and Latin texts on the Etruscans were often written considerably **later** than the period they refer to. The reliability of the information they contain therefore depends on the quality of the sources their authors read.
- Longer accounts did exist (ex.: the *Tyrrheniká* ["Etruscan Things"] by the emperor Claudius), but do not survive.
- → Cf. also Barker & Rasmussen pp. 85-87.

# Etruscan language and writing

- Etruscan script is decipherable: the Etruscans adapted the **alphabet** used by **Euboean Greeks**. The Euboeans had taken the alphabet from the Phoenicians and adapted it to their own use.
- The adaptation the Greek alphabet to the Etruscan language required **changes**. The Greek letters for b, g, d, and o were dropped from the alphabet , and an extra letter ‘8’ was introduced to represent the/f/-sound ([slide 12](#)).
- Some **thirteen thousand texts** written in Etruscan are known. These are mainly short and often repetitive funerary or votive inscriptions. Longer (ritual and legal) texts survive, but they are fragmented and not well understood.
- **Etruscan literature** and historiography must have existed, but they too have not survived. Hence, there is no Etruscan-written history of the Etruscans.

# Etruscan Alphabets: Regional and Chronological Characteristics

- At around 400 BCE, a **simplified alphabet** was created, the so-called neo-Etruscan alphabet. Several letters were dropped.
- The **signs for s** differed in Southern Etruria and Northern Etruria (where it was written M, in modern transcriptions ſ). It is therefore possible to identify both chronological and regional characteristics in Etruscan inscriptions.
- From ca. 500 BCE onward, the vowels that were not accented in Etruscan words seem to have weakened in pronunciation and tended to disappear in writing. This resulted in consonant clusters. The phenomenon is known as **syncope**.
- Examples of syncope: Rasenna is contracted to Rasna, Ramutha to Ramtha, Aranth to Arnth.
- For the chart, cf. also Barker&Rasmussen p. 88

| Transcription/<br>phonetic value | Seventh century South<br>Etruscan (Cerveteri) | Seventh century<br>North Etruscan | Hellenistic<br>South Etruscan | Hellenistic<br>North Etruscan |
|----------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| a                                | A   | A                                 | A                             | A                             |
| c (k)                            | C   |                                   | C                             | C                             |
| e                                | Ξ   | Ξ                                 | Ξ                             | Ξ                             |
| v                                | Γ   | Γ                                 | Γ                             | Γ                             |
| z                                | I   | I                                 | I                             | ȝ                             |
| h                                | 日   | 日                                 | 日                             | 日 ⊖                           |
| θ (th)                           | ⊗ ⊕   | ⊕ ◦                               | ○                             | ○                             |
| i                                | I   | I                                 | I                             | I                             |
| k                                | K   | K                                 |                               | K                             |
| l                                | J   | J                                 | J                             | J                             |
| m                                | W   | W                                 | M                             | MΛ                            |
| n                                | Y   | Y                                 | N                             | N                             |
| p                                | 1   | 1                                 | 1                             | 1                             |
| q                                | Ω   |                                   |                               |                               |
| ſ                                |   | M                                 |                               | M                             |
| r                                | ¶ D   | ¶                                 | ¶                             | D ¶                           |
| s                                | Z   | Z                                 | Z                             | Z                             |
| š                                | ʒ   |                                   | ʒ                             |                               |
| t                                | T   | T                                 | T                             | T                             |
| u                                | Y V Y   | V                                 | V                             | V                             |
| Φ (ph)                           | Φ   | Φ                                 | Φ                             | Φ                             |
| X (kh)                           | Y   | Y                                 | ↓                             | ↓                             |
| ſ                                | +   |                                   |                               |                               |
| f                                |   |                                   | 8                             | 8                             |

- Etruscan inscriptions show that Etruscan was different from other languages spoken in Italy at that time, including Latin, Faliscan, Osci-Umbrian, and Greek. These languages belong to the Indo-European language family, and Etruscan did not.
- As Etruscan seems to be an **isolated language**, the so-called “etymological method” is of no help in understanding it. The **etymological method** uses genealogical connections between languages to determine their grammatical structure and the meaning of words.
- Texts from the island of **Lemnos** show similarities with Etruscan. An inscribed stele from Caminia (**slide 14**) is perhaps written in a variant of Archaic Etruscan and might represent the language of Etruscan seafarers active on Lemnos between 700 and 500 BCE.
- The linguist Helmut Rix proposed that Etruscan and Lemnian belong to the **“Tyrsenian” language family**, together with Rhaetic, a language spoken in the Eastern Alps in the pre-Roman and Roman periods. This hypothesis is difficult to prove, since very few texts in Rhaetic and Lemnian exist.



### Grave stele

From Caminia, Lemnos

6th cent. BCE

In Athens, National Museum

Cf. also Barker&Rasmussen p. 95 fig. 31.

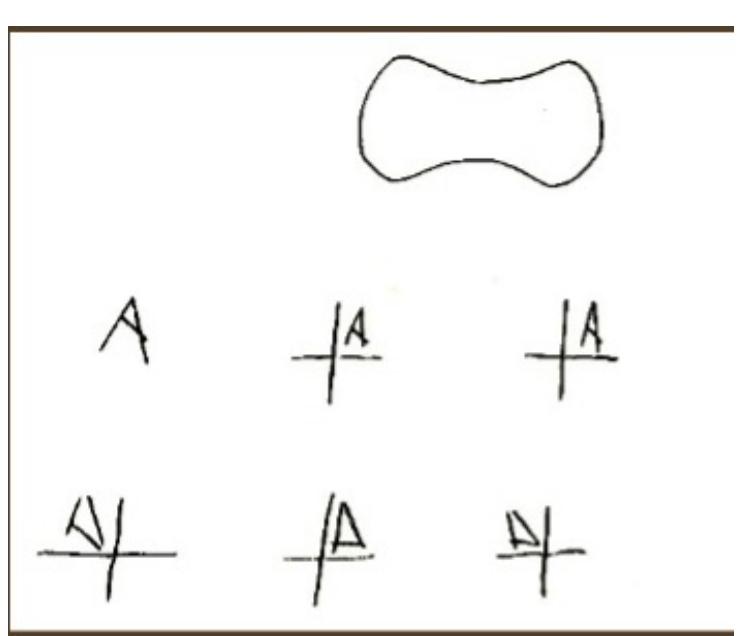


Top: **Inscribed spools**, fired clay

Late 8<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE

From Veii, Casale del Fosso necropolis, tomb 870

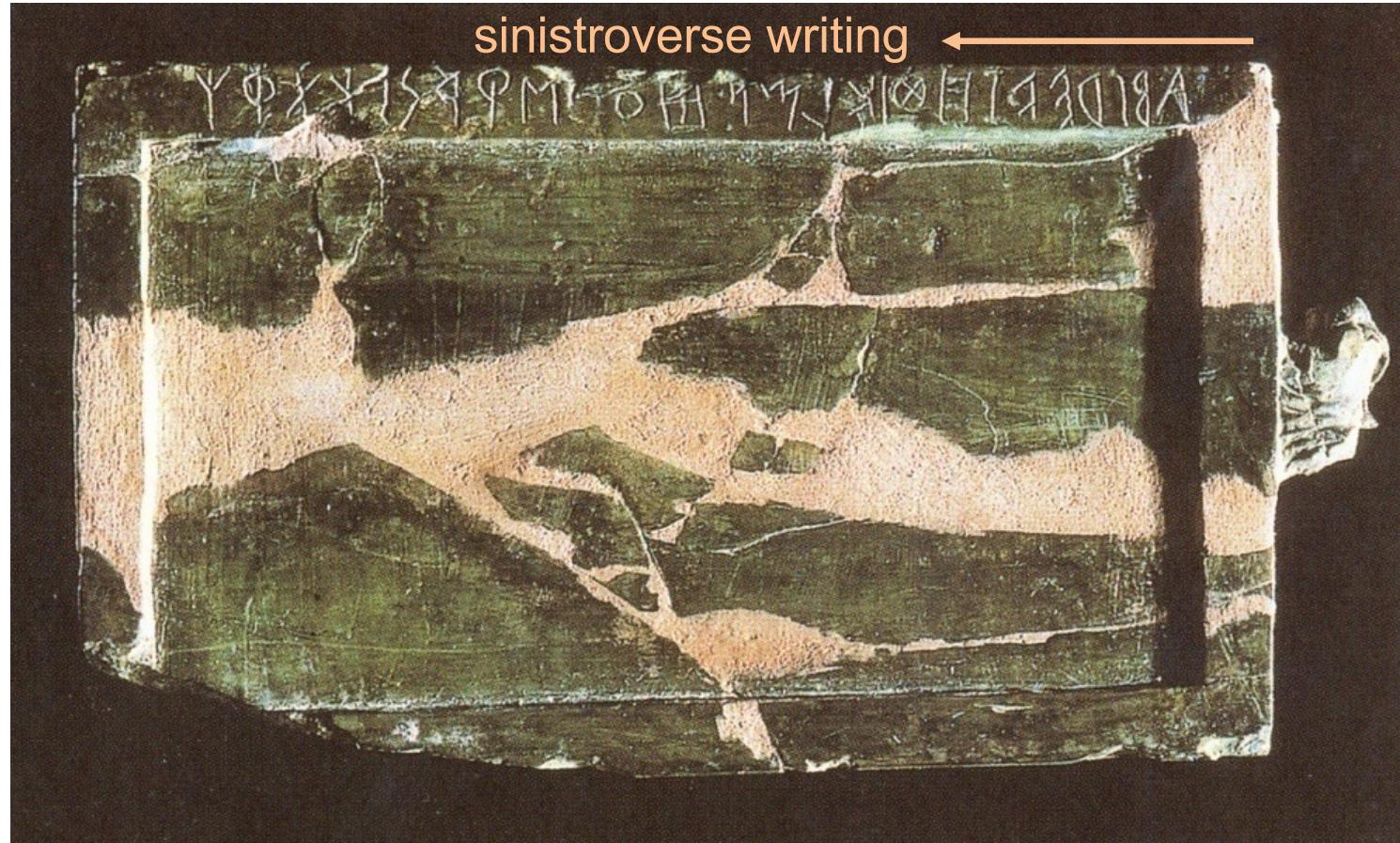
Right: Drawing of spools and inscribed letters



## *Language and writing (cont.)*

- The major part of the known **early inscriptions** (mostly from the 7th cent.) come from **Southern Etruria**: Veii, Cerveteri, Tarquinia, and Vulci.
- Among the **earliest attestations** for Etruscan letters are 8<sup>th</sup>-century **clay spools** found in a necropolis near Veii ([slide 15](#)). On the spools, the letter “A” was incised after firing, maybe the mark of the female owner – an early proof of female literacy among the Etruscan elite?
- **Model alphabets** and groups of syllables incised on objects have been found in various 7<sup>th</sup>-century aristocratic tombs. They are status symbols that enhance the cultural value of the object and indicate that the head of the family was literate, a mark of social distinction.
- Among the grave goods from the “Circle of Ivories” at Marsiliana d’Albegna was an **ivory writing tablet** ([slide 17, left](#)) complete with styluses and “eraser” blades. A Euboean Greek model alphabet (**abecedarium**), the **earliest** known from Etruria, is incised on the frame from right to left, the usual writing direction in Etruscan, although there are exceptions. An elongated vessel from the Regolini-Galassi tomb is inscribed with syllables and an alphabet ([slide 17, right](#)).
- The Etruscan alphabets were influential for the neighbouring peoples in Italy, and later even for the Germanic peoples: the Germanic **runic script** was derived from North Etruscan models.

→Cf. Barker&Rasmussen pp. 4–5, 80-82 and 94-99.



**Top: Ivory writing tablet**  
From Marsiliana d'Albegna  
Ca. 670 BCE  
In Grosseto, Museo Archeologico

**Right: Vessel**  
Fired clay  
From Cerveteri, Regolini-Galassi Tomb  
Ca. 650 BCE  
In the Vatican, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco

