
Origins

The Etruscans sailed the seas. They are even said to have come by sea, from Lydia in Asia Minor, at some date far back in the dim mists before the eighth century B.C. But that a whole people, even a whole host, sailed in the tiny ships of those days, all at once, to people a sparsely inhabited central Italy, seems hard to imagine.

D.H. Lawrence (1932) *Etruscan Places*

Introduction

Before the development of systematic archaeological research, scholars interested in the origins of the Etruscans could only scrutinize the writings of the Greek and Roman authors, given the absence of Etruscan literature. The impossibility of treating such sources as 'factual history' will be discussed at length in the next chapter. Suffice to say here that the ancient writers were conspicuously inconsistent in what they said regarding the question of Etruscan origins.

At one end of the spectrum is the comment made by Herodotus in the fifth century BC (*Histories* 1.94) that the Lydians of Asia Minor (modern western Turkey), forced by famine to leave their homeland, sailed westwards under their leader Tyrrhenus and established themselves in Etruria, founding the Etruscan cities. A diametrically opposite view, however, was put forward by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1.30.2) in the first century BC, who pronounced that the Etruscans were indigenous to Italy: they called themselves Rasenna and were an ancient nation 'which does not resemble any other people in their language or in their way of life, or customs'. A third (modern) theory, which springs in part from the Roman historian Livy, is that the Etruscans came down into Italy overland from the north across the Alps: he pointed to similarities between the Etruscans and the inhabitants of Rhaetia in the region of the river Danube.

As the Etruscan scholar David Randall-MacIver emphasized, to reconstruct the cultural background that preceded the emergence of a recognizably Etruscan culture in the eighth century BC, we have to put aside the writings of the Greek and Roman authors and turn instead to archaeology 'on which alone any valid arguments can be based'.¹ It has to be said, however, that archaeological data can be just as ambiguous and amenable to alternative interpretations as documentary data. Since systematic archaeological research began in the mid nineteenth century, for example, some archaeologists have detected evidence in the material culture in support of the original 'oriental' theory of Etruscan origins, some have favoured the 'indigenous' theory and others have favoured an origin going back to the preceding Iron Age but have seen the origin of that culture north of the Alps!

Virtually all archaeologists now agree that the evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of the 'indigenous' theory of Etruscan origins: the development of Etruscan culture has to be understood within an evolutionary sequence of social elaboration in Etruria. Explaining this process, however, is still far more difficult than describing it. For example, contact with the outside world, particularly with the Greeks and Phoenicians, was certainly an important factor within the final stages of this process, but scholars disagree about the extent to which such contact was a cause of increasing cultural complexity in Etruria, or a result, or both.

The most important developments in social complexity presaging the emergence of Etruscan culture took place in the preceding 500 years or so, the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age, when the settlement system changed from one based on hamlets and farms to one that included, on top of this, substantial villages and proto-urban centres. The Late Bronze Age certainly marked significant cultural changes in Etruria compared with before, which have sometimes been interpreted in terms of the arrival of new peoples (the colonization movement from the north referred to above). However, while the period 1300–800 BC remains the principal focus of interest, to answer the question 'Who were the Etruscans?' we also have to sketch in briefly the earlier settlement history of Etruria in order to establish the amount of continuity or change in the population of the region before the Late Bronze Age, and to understand the social foundations of the stratified societies which we can discern in the archaeological record in the centuries immediately preceding the Etruscan civilization.

1 MacIver, 1928