THE ETRUSCANS

LOST CIVILIZATIONS

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REAKTION BOOKS

THREE

Ostrich Eggs and Oriental Dreams

Travelling north from Tarquinia, the landscape subtly shifts. You are edging towards the flat marshlands of the Maremma, and the coastal resorts vanish, replaced by scrubland. After the dramatic scarp rearing above the sea, these flatlands seem drab. Yet it is here that some of the most remarkable discoveries in Etruscan archaeology have taken place. The Etruscan city of Vulci, unlike Tarquinia, has not survived as a settlement. Long abandoned, the closest modern settlement is the small town of Montalto di Castro. On arrival at the Archaeological Park that covers the site, there's not much to see. Indeed, the first visible attraction is a herd of the white cattle discussed in the previous chapter. This does not appear to be the richest fount of Etruscan treasures, the home of spectacular artefacts, found in vast numbers. This set of fields, studded with grubby ruins – a sad Roman archway, half destroyed temples and numerous lumps and bumps – was the source of beautiful objects that have found homes in museums all over the world.

Approaching one of the mounds, you suddenly realize how much human effort has gone into creating it. The deep entranceway, known as a dromos, stretches downwards into the earth. On and on, you take each step carefully, stepping at last behind the glass door into the cool darkness of a burial place. Now it makes sense. This is a place where the dead were privileged, laid to rest amid the trappings of life, beneath tumuli raised by hundreds of hands, putting in the hours to demonstrate the power of dead ancestors and living families. You might be forgiven for thinking that the mound would be quite enough of a spectacle, enough to

make a lasting impression. Yet inside these tombs were placed a range of goods that illustrate the wealth and power of some individuals in this society – a trading network that stretched for thousands of miles, access to resources that won items as valuable and exotic as any lottery winner could dream of. The objects at the centre of this chapter come from a single tomb within the Polledrara necropolis at Vulci. This tomb is only one of hundreds that encircle the city – there are four separate necropoleis, with the largest, Osteria, to the north of the settlement area. Polledrara, Ponte Rotto and Cavalupo are all to the east, studded with mounds and dips, still revealing treasures.[1]

The objects from this tomb are not to be found in the lonely museum at Vulci. They lie, cossetted by conservators and carefully lit, in the Etruscan gallery of the British Museum.[2] Crowds of schoolchildren dash past on their way to the showstoppers, the gilded mummies and shining Saxon treasures – if you are looking for a spot of peace and quiet among the hubbub of a visit, the Etruscan gallery is a good bet. It sits in a corner of the vast building, with sixty objects from this special tomb among other treasures from across Italy. The captions label each item; the lights bounce off bronze and faience (an early form of glass), ivory and clay. The story of these objects – their journey from the hands of the people who made them to burial in an Etruscan tomb through the hands of antiquities dealers to a safe haven in a backwater of the British Museum – is the story of this chapter.

So what are these special objects? Here are some of the artefacts found in this single burial:

- A bronze statue of a woman holding a gilded bird.
- A gold diadem, covered with designs of fantastical beasts and palms.
- Four ostrich eggs, carved with intricate patterns of horses and chariots.
- A series of bronze cups and bowls, some simple, some complicated.
- Three alabaster and gypsum perfume bottles, all formed in the shape of women.

Winged lion tomb guardian from a tumulus, or earthen mound, near Vulci, *c.* 550 BCE, stone sculpture (nenfro). Was its design inspired by contact with the Near East?

- A group of terracotta spools, which may have once held rich threads.
- A bronze lamp and lamp stand.
- A group of amulets in the shape of dung beetles.
- Five shining flasks made of faience.
- A painted gypsum statue of a woman with outstretched hands.

Any of these objects would make for a spectacular find. The cache of spools, the ostrich eggs – any one of these finds would be the

highlight of an archaeological career. Together, as an assemblage – a deliberately curated collection of objects – they are incredible.[3] The people who placed these objects together had access not only to the very best of Etruscan workmanship in the form of the bronze sculptures and vessels, but to the most luxurious objects that the ancient Mediterranean had to offer. The dung beetle amulets, or scarabs, are a good place to start. These industrious little creatures, rolling their balls of faeces across the desert sands, are ineffably associated with one place: Egypt. The carved eggs could have come from Egypt too, defunct offspring of the now-endangered North African ostrich. Yet the carving is a style familiar from the archaeology of the Near East, and the scarabs too suggest an origin in the Levant. The carved alabaster perfume vessel was made in western Turkey, probably in a community of people who considered themselves Greek.

If you only found one of these objects, you might think that the person buried with it had brought that object across the seas themselves, perhaps a migrant. With the classical texts echoing in your head, the Turkish perfume vessels might suggest you had found some concrete evidence to support the Herodotus story. The problem is that the people buried in this tomb weren't just accompanied by *one* of these stand-out objects – they received the whole lot. So the conviction that objects define where a person comes from becomes hard to sustain. It's approximately 1,250 miles to the Egyptian coast from Vulci; it is around 1,000 miles to western Turkey, and 1,400 miles to the shores of Syria and Lebanon. Unless the people buried in this tomb were a mixture of individuals from all these different places, each buried with the best their craftspeople could produce, we are seeing the fruits of a trading network that stretched across these thousands of miles, along with some of the remarkable goods that provided for their purchase in the first place.

This point in time, the late seventh century BCE, was the culmination of over a hundred years of social change.[4] Burial practice shifted towards the great mounds, away from urns and flames. Towns grew out of villages, as people settled in increasing numbers around central attractions – places to trade, places to share

beliefs, places to meet and share.[5] This process of change is only slightly interrupted during the first half of the seventh century – a point at which this growth seems to falter. The burgeoning early centres began to contract. It is tempting to look for environmental factors to find the causes for this recession. Perhaps a series of bad harvests, or a wobble in climate, led to the famously fertile Tuscan soil failing the people who relied upon it for their living – although there's little to no evidence for this in studies of the period. Or the mechanisms for bringing in wealth failed – perhaps the metal resources that made Etruria rich dwindled for a while, until new sources were found. It was surely these two sources of bounty – the metallic ores and fertile soils – that enabled the inhabitants of central Italy to surge forward once again during the second half of the seventh century, leaping back to prominence and wealth. It was at this point that the artefacts found in our tomb were assembled.

Ostrich egg decorated with sphinxes, from the Isis tomb, Vulci.

A perfume vessel imported from Naukratis, Egypt, to Tarquinia, 6th century.

What was it about these designs, these materials, that made them so popular and so precious? The idea of exoticism, that objects are valuable due to their distant origins, has been the traditional reason given for their appeal. This idea has uncomfortable connotations. The conception of exotic is tainted, forever associated with either zoos and gawping, or worse, with colonialism and exploitation. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century models of trade recall the arrival in European and American cities of people, objects and animals from the furthest reaches of Empire, valued for their strangeness, the otherness that brought together those who viewed them. On the other side of the coin, traders could look down on indigenous communities who they steadily short-changed, using the mystique of faraway materials to manipulate them.[6] In the modern globalized world, the value of distance has disappeared from objects. 'Made in China', 'Made in Taiwan' – the faraway location

of an object's production no longer possesses an emotional pull. The container ship and the factory floor have removed exoticism from the everyday encounter.

Or have they? Exotic still exists, but in a different form. Recognizing what makes a modern object special provides an insight into a desire shared with the Etruscan inhabitants of Vulci. It is not distance but relationships that make an object special. It is exactly the impersonal nature of modern long-distance trades that has sapped their power to thrill. Instead, it is the people we have met, the stories we can tell, that give a thing its value. Even an ordinary item – a loaf of bread – becomes extraordinary once it is elevated by personal relationships. The relationships that make this bread special extend outwards in two directions from the person doing the serving: guests appreciate that their host has the right kind of connections; the bakery owners gain new audiences. The host can brag of their links to the bakery, or choose not to – the bread will do the talking.

It's easy to be facetious, to make fun of the hipster ideal of the personalized commodity. It was also easy to trot out the mileage of each item found in the tomb. Yet it is not the miles themselves that define these artefacts as exotic, as valuable. It is the connections and links that cross the miles that are so impressive. Each object represents a series of journeys made on a purchaser's behalf, links in a chain that crossed the seas. Whether or not they were acquired from trading settlements established by Near Eastern and Greek migrants in Sicily and Sardinia, or gained on direct missions to Egypt, Turkey and the Levant, though interesting, is not vitally important. Such objects were symbols that their owners were plugged in to an impressive and valuable chain of relationships.[7] They had the right connections, were part of a trans-Mediterranean elite, able to impress at home with their links to the world beyond. The archaeological evidence for the existence of these shared values is scattered all over the trade routes these people were plugged into. Shipwrecks off the coast of Turkey have been found to contain jewellery from Sardinia and bronzes from Etruria.[8] The objects in the tomb at Vulci are the material remains of a social network, with people liking and sharing both physical things and

ideals. These ideals are reflected in the objects themselves – rich oils and luxurious threads, for making the body beautiful; drinking sets of costly bronze, dedicated to transforming eating and drinking into a special experience. From shore to shore, people were trading on their shared value of pleasure. Showing off who you knew, what your wealth and position could buy you from them, and the fun of what you received – what's not to enjoy?

This list of items is only a fraction of the artefacts buried in the tomb, however. An unknowable number of other items were smashed to pieces by the discoverers. For this tomb was excavated in the early nineteenth century, ransacked by treasure hunters who stumbled upon a glimmering hoard. It was the imported objects that caught their eye, far more than the locally made goods. Just as the staggering connections impress modern visitors, it was the link with the East that the discoverers seized upon. The perceived influence attached to the goods gave its name to this entire period of Etruscan history – it was termed Orientalizing. The fascination of the Orient, a mystical land inhabited by a strange and dangerous Other, had a deep pull over European audiences for centuries. This idea, described and critiqued by the philosopher Edward Said, was mired in colonial insecurity and racial bias.[9] Myths and tales, from *The Arabian Nights* to the stories of Rudyard Kipling, all shared in the making of this legend. It is the same narrative that lies behind the lost civilization myth, as described in the Prologue to this book. Inevitably, the materials from Vulci were sucked into the story, part of a deliberate opposition of East and West, Europe and Asia. Perhaps this was unavoidable, given the identity of the man who funded their discovery in the first place.

Lucien Bonaparte (1775–1840) was a highly fortunate young man.[10] Born into relative poverty in Corsica, the third of eight children, the stratospheric rise of his brother Napoleon had transformed his destiny. Unlike some of the other Bonaparte siblings, however, Lucien was deeply unsettled by his brother's power. A genuine believer in the revolutionary cause, Lucien became president of the lower house of the French revolutionary parliament, the Council of Five Hundred, only to be ousted by his brother's coup in 1799. Storming into the parliamentary chambers, Napoleon

forcibly disbanded the Council. Lucien threatened to kill his brother if he betrayed the revolutionary principles of *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*. This was a piece of showboating designed to reassure onlookers of the family's dedication to the Republic. However, real cracks had already begun to appear in this fraternal united front by 1800, after seditious pamphlets were traced back to Lucien's hand. In spite of the growing distrust between the siblings, Napoleon dispatched Lucien to Spain, where he won over the Bourbon royal family to his brother's cause. On his return, however, the relationship between the two men steadily deteriorated.

The last straw for Lucien was the attempt by Napoleon to force him into a dynastic marriage with the widowed Queen of Etruria. He fled to Rome in 1804, moving into a luxurious villa in the beautiful wine-growing town of Frascati. It was this move that piqued Lucien's archaeological interests. Near to Frascati are the ruins of the city of Tusculum, and Lucien began excavations on his lands, discovering a remarkable Imperial statue of the emperor Tiberius. Ten years later, after a flight to England, Lucien returned to Italy and to his passion for the past. He was enthroned as Prince of Canino by the Pope in 1814, while Napoleon was exiled in Elba. This title brought with it lands in the province of Viterbo – including a certain village known as Montalto di Castro. It was towards the end of his life, in 1839, that he sponsored a team to begin work in the Polledrara Cemetery. While Lucien had opened Etruscan tombs before, this excavation was a spectacular success.[11] The glorious gypsum statue of a woman was immediately (and wrongly) identified with the Egyptian goddess Isis, and the tomb given its enduring name – the Isis tomb.

Fibula with granulated decoration – a favourite Etruscan technique – from the 7th century.

Small skyphos, or drinking cup, 6th century BCE.

This identification links with a key moment in the development of the 'Orientalizing' period as an idea. The direct connection of the tomb to the Bonaparte family is important too. For the label of the Orient, and the fantasy of the East into which Etruscan culture was slotted, was largely defined by Lucien's brother's most famous conquests – in Egypt and the Levant. Napoleon had begun warming up the French establishment to the idea of taking power in Egypt in 1798, seeing it as an opportunity to disrupt British involvement in India. His ideas were enthusiastically received – the scheme was seen as a way of removing a potentially dangerous political rival from France. If successful, it would simultaneously damage Britain and boost the fragile economy of the Republic. French and Italian forces embarked at ports across the Mediterranean in May 1789. Over forty thousand men disembarked at Alexandria on 1 July, followed by Napoleon on his flagship *L'Orient*. In spite of the vicious heat, the army progressed southwards, taking Cairo after a fierce battle within sight of the pyramids at Giza.

The victorious Napoleon deliberately began to emulate the city's elite, determined to present himself as a liberator and a friend of Islam. This act failed to convince the Egyptian population. By October, Cairo was in revolt. Vicious street fighting ended with Napoleon ordering the firing of the Grand Mosque, an act of terror which cowed the city. Ruling by fear, Napoleon felt safe enough to expand his offensive northeastwards, marching on through Sinai

to Palestine. He took control of the lands as far as the Gaza Strip, before being turned back by British naval forces and the Ottoman army. A year on from the initial venture eastwards, 600 men had been lost to disease, 1,200 killed in battle and 1,800 wounded. Napoleon left Egypt for power in France in August 1799, leaving behind a military mire. Britain would take Egypt only scant years later, assisted by the alienated Egyptian Mameluke rulers who had seen through Napoleon's cultural appropriation.[12]

Napoleon's army had been accompanied by a group of scholars determined to conquer Egypt's past, as well as its present. These scholars personified the importance of Orientalism as a scientific concept. They illustrated the supposedly essential features of Egyptian and Levantine life. Passive acceptance of outside authority, cultural stasis, the luxurious lives of a corrupt elite – these characteristics were used to illustrate the superiority of French values. It is not a coincidence that these social ills exactly reflected the evils of the last days of the French monarchy. At the same time, the French (but also the British, Germans and, as we saw in Chapter Two, the Italians) laid claim to the inheritance of the classical world. Re-imagined through an Enlightenment lens, classical rationalism, republicanism, democracy – all were embraced by politicians and thinkers delighted by the idea of themselves as heirs to the glories of Rome and Greece.[13] The die was cast: Eastern indolence against Western self-determination. This racist pseudo-science, designed to back up a series of usurpations of land and power in the Near East and Asia, trickled into the archaeological endeavours of the expedition, even as it dictated public opinion of the Ottoman realms back in France. The splendours of ancient Egypt embodied dynastic rule, with its spectacular inequalities and equally spectacular artefacts. By bringing Egyptian antiquities back to France, the people would be introduced to authoritarian ancient rulers through their works.

That was the intention of Napoleon's army of archaeological pirates, raiding Egypt's ancient sites. It did not quite play out as originally planned, however. After Napoleon abandoned his campaign to return to France and seize power, his scientists were left struggling with their vast collections. In 1801, the vast majority of

the objects were seized by the British Navy and shipped back to Britain. The objects included the iconic Rosetta Stone, and became the founding Egyptian collection of the British Museum. There they were used to introduce the same sense of cultural separation in London as they had been intended for in Paris. The story of Napoleon's lost antiquities chimes with the fate of the finds from Lucien's excavations. Four years after Lucien Bonaparte's death in 1840, the same fate befell his collection from the Isis tomb. His widow, in need of ready funds, sold sixty items to the German archaeologist Emil Braun, who in turn sold them to the British Museum. Just as the British public could ogle the fruits of despotic rule in Egypt, they were also free to gaze at objects that transported this dangerous Eastern influence to the very doorstep of Rome.

The concepts of Orientalism honed through Napoleon's campaign in Egypt were brought to bear on the antiquities his brother unearthed from Vulci. Identified with Egypt through the female statue, the artefacts became part of a perhaps less conscious narrative – that of the pernicious influence of the East on pre-Roman Italy. The study and display of these artefacts were initially seen as proof of the veracity of the classical sources dealing with the origin myth of the Etruscans.[14] Even after this idea was dispelled by the archaeology in the early twentieth century, the taint of the Oriental clung to this period of rapid development and change. The inequality inherent in the acquisition of such luxury goods was characterized as associated with authoritarian rule – the establishment of a system of kings. The Isis tomb, and others like it, were described in this language. They were 'princely' tombs, burial spaces of rulers cast in the image of pharaohs and maharajas.[15] The Etruscan Orientalizing period inherited the propaganda of Napoleon's campaign, and British fantasies of India. The Isis tomb, and others like it, became the burial places of kings and queens, princes and princesses, stuffed with inherited wealth.

The problem is that there is no evidence at all for this kind of rule in Italy. Yes, social inequality is made increasingly visible by the introduction of new goods from faraway places, but it seems far more likely that existing powerful families took advantage of their connections and holdings to establish trading empires rather

than hereditary kingdoms.[16] New research is revealing the tiny proportion of objects from this period which were imported from the Eastern Mediterranean.[17] While objects *influenced* by Eastern designs – like those showing goddesses surrounded by wild beasts, and non-native animals such as lions – are represented more widely, they too make up a minimal proportion of the material culture of Etruscan society at this point. So not only do we have no evidence for princes, and little to no evidence for a migration from the East, we now have evidence that the scale of Eastern influence has been vastly over exaggerated. The artefacts that did arrive must have been incorporated into a largely independent system of beliefs and values, signs that marked out their owners as part of a trading network but not necessarily as rulers and leaders by hereditary right. The old Oriental model of rule in Etruria, based on the idea that the adoption of objects equals the adoption of ideas, is no longer a tenable idea.

The whole story of the objects from the Isis tomb, the development of an Orientalizing period and its downfall, is woven from a number of themes: the hubris of colonialism and the fear of the unknown, the equation of people with things and equation of wealth with royal power, the destruction of the everyday and preservation of the unusual. These are all features that continue to define our world. The after-effects of Orientalism as an attitude are perhaps more visible than ever. The Arab Spring was built upon the overthrow of dictators cast as Oriental despots, cheered on by a rationalist liberal media. Yet its aftershocks have resulted in the re-establishment of a self-declared caliphate, a political and military force that defines itself against the West. The fighters of so-called Islamic State (ISIS) have turned the racism of Oriental prejudice on its head, setting up Europe and America as Others in their turn. Their war on the West incorporates antiquities just as Napoleon's campaigns did. Instead of collecting and preserving, however, objects from the ancient past are seen as items for sale, or ideal fodder for propaganda videos. The sites and objects that defined Orientalist archaeology have become idols to be used to distance the forces of ISIS from their past. Examples of items similar to those found in the Isis tomb have been smashed

and stolen, sold on an open market to vanish into private collections. Made in the Near East, they have become hostages in a war of ideas. Sat in their glass cases, the fragile ostrich eggs and delicately carved statues from the Isis tomb emphasize the consequences of imposing colonial worldviews on both the past and the present.

The story of these objects' impact on Etruscan archaeology has another lesson to teach us, namely not to associate people with objects. In an increasingly globalized world, things pass from culture to culture, being reinvented and reformed in the blink of an eye. Images and styles change and shift more and more quickly, lapped up by dedicated followers of fashion. Claiming identity through the origin of objects is increasingly problematic, and not just for archaeologists. It is what we as users *do* with things that is important. It is the way that objects allow us to make friends, claim kinship, share love, inspire respect. The goods from the Isis tomb, impressive though their disparate starting points might seem, survived because of the impression they made on their *owners'* lives. As a tool of communication, they are still shouting their message of wealth and connections as loudly as when they were first buried. Made by one pair of hands, passing through others and ending in a

Elaborate bronze cauldron, probably from Vetulonia, made in the early 7th century.

tomb, these remarkable objects are probably not the unique crown jewels of an Oriental-style autocratic royal dynasty, but the fruits of a lifetime of trade and exchange, carefully collected and brought together by a grieving family to make a statement about their lost loved ones. How and why they chose to do so is the subject of the next chapter.