Local leaders would have been linked to their clients in a set of mutual obligations, such as receiving gifts, tribute, labour and so on in return for providing protection, communal services and foodstuffs. In turn, they would have been beholden to more powerful leaders in parallel systems of clientship. The economic systems associated with social structures of this kind typically involve the use of the labour of the paramount's dependent group to produce foodstuffs and domestic prestige items for redistribution, as well as commodities for external trade.[141] Given the biases of the data, we can best discern the latter part of the system, but it is highly likely that the production and distribution of foodstuffs such as cereals and legumes, meat, cheese and wine (together with important side-products such as wool), and the technology of agricultural production such as cattle or ox teams and ploughs, were also increasingly within the control of the Villanovan elites. Presumably the control of raw materials such as metal ores, or at least access to them, was also critical.

The problem of the Etruscan language

The social context of Etruscan literacy is discussed in the next chapter, but a few comments are needed here on the vexed problem of the origins of the Etruscan language. Although, as described in the preceding sections of this chapter, the archaeological evidence overwhelmingly suggests that Etruscan society developed out of the preceding societies of Etruria, the linguistic evidence has frequently been cited as conclusively pointing to exotic origins. Virtually all the languages of Europe share a number of common word stems that indicate they belong to a 'family' of related languages, termed Indo-European; Etruscan, however, along with Basque, Hungarian and Finnish, is not part of this family. Thus in Indo-European languages, both ancient and modern, numerals typically have common roots which we can recognize even if we don't know the language: one, two, three; un, deux, trois; ein, zwei, drei; uno, duo, tre, etc. The same numbers in Etruscan are the completely unfamiliar *thu*, *zal* and *ci*. The Etruscan language is unrelated to any of the other (Indo-European) ancient languages spoken in Italy such as Umbrian, Oscan and Latin.[142] The only known similarity is with a dialect that

141 Frankenstein and Rowlands, 1978; Webster, 1990
142 Bonfante, 1990; Bonfante and Bonfante, 1983

was being spoken on the island of Lemnos in the northern Aegean, according to inscriptions found there dating to the second half of the sixth century BC (see chapter 3, p. 94 and fig. 31), which in turn was different from all the other languages being spoken in Greece at that time. (Nobody knows how and when it was first spoken there.) 'The problem of Etruscan origins is encapsulated in the peculiarity of their language.'[143]

The first texts written in the Etruscan language date to around 700 BC. The language was written in a version of the Greek alphabet, which in turn was developed and adapted from the Phoenician and was probably adopted in Etruria from Euboean Greek, not much later than its adoption in Greece;[144] it was presumably acquired from contact with the Greek colonies in the Bay of Naples.[145] Of course the Lemnos inscription has provided invaluable grist to the mill for those looking for Etruscan origins in the eastern Mediterranean, but given that it dates over a century later than the first Etruscan inscriptions in Etruria, it could logically be used to argue that Etruscans did the colonizing, not the other way round! The Etruscan language must have been spoken in Etruria long before it was first written down, though how early we cannot tell, but certainly we must assume that people were speaking a version of the language at least during the Villanovan period.

Why Etruscan was so different from the other ancient languages we know were spoken in the Mediterranean region remains a mystery. Ever since the Indo-European language group was recognized in the nineteenth century, archaeologists have tried to identify evidence for folk movements from the east that might have introduced a core Indo-European language. Some have favoured the second millennium BC,[146] others the third millennium BC,[147] though the evidence cited is no longer accepted. More recently, Renfrew[148] has argued that the only satisfactory context for such a folk movement would have been the spread of agriculture in the fifth and fourth millennia BC, though explaining the transition to farming in Europe in terms of a folk movement no longer seems as convincing as a decade or so ago.

143 Bonfante, 1990
144 McCarter, 1975
145 Colonna, 1976
146 Gimbutas, 1965
147 Piggott, 1965
148 Renfrew, 1987

As Renfrew has recently argued, the most important advances in the study of the origins of ancient languages may well come from the biomolecular studies of DNA in modern populations.[149] Interestingly, a preliminary study of the mitochondrial DNA of modern Tuscans in the region of Siena has also indicated a long history of similarity with other Causasian populations rather than unusual genetic patterning.[150] (It is intended to develop this study by comparing the DNA of these modern Tuscan populations with that of human remains from Etruscan tombs.)

The evidence of physical type

The bones of Etruscans have also been studied for evidence of their origins. Physical anthropologists a hundred years ago confidently divided Etruscan skulls into two types, interpreted respectively as 'indigenous' and 'eastern Mediterranean', in support of the prevailing theories of colonization, and as late as the 1950s Etruscan skulls were still being classified by de Beer as having a 'typically Near Eastern cranial form'.[151] He also interpreted blood group variation in present-day Etrurian populations as evidence for an ancient migration of Etruscans from the eastern Mediterranean. By the 1960s, however, the variability in skull shape was being regarded simply as 'typically Mediterranean' and de Beer's blood group theory completely abandoned. Today most of the anthropological studies of Etruscan burials are concentrating on information regarding diet, nutrition and health (see chapter 6), but where population characteristics have been investigated, at one end of the spectrum there is evidence of strong homogeneity in local Etruscan burial populations suggestive of kin groups,[152] and at the other, of broad similarities between Etruscans and contemporary iron age societies south of the Tiber and east of the Apennines.[153] In exactly the same way, whereas nineteenth-century studies of neolithic, copper age and bronze age skeletons from central Italy invariably divided them into 'local' and 'eastern' types on the basis of skull measurements, the physical anthropologists now emphasize the broad homogeneity of central Mediterranean prehistoric populations,[154] results that chime with the

149 Renfrew, 1992
150 Cinelli, 1993
151 de Beer, 1955
152 Pardini and Mannucci, 1981
153 Saloi, 1981
154 Corrain and Capitanio, 1975; Robb, 1994

DNA studies mentioned above. At present, therefore, there is neither skeletal nor genetic evidence for significant 'differentness' between Etruscans and the people living in Etruria before them, or between Etruscans and their neighbours, or even between Etruscans and their successors in this part of Italy.

The origins of the Etruscans

The Etruscans – at least as recorded by the Greek and Roman writers – certainly had a strong sense of their own ethnicity, of the fact that they were Etruscans, or *Rasenna*. As their culture was absorbed into the Roman world, the folk memory of Etruscan 'different-ness' understandably must have taken on an ever greater importance in their psyche. However, although a few people today still prefer the romantic myth of Etruscan exotic origins, it must be viewed as just that – a myth. As we have seen, there is no evidence for the kind of cultural break at the Villanovan/Etruscan transition envisaged by either of the 'plantation' models (an entire 'exotic people', or just an 'exotic elite') from the eastern Mediterranean, or for a folk movement of either kind from continental Europe in the Late Bronze Age or Iron Age. The overwhelming evidence of the archaeological record is that the origins of Etruscan society lie fundamentally in the later prehistoric communities of Etruria. By the close of the Villanovan Iron Age the framework of the Etruscan economic, social and political system (and presumably their language) had already been established, and the roots go back certainly to the late second millennium BC.

Many scholars who have accepted the general thrust of the 'indigenous' argument still prefer to use the evidence for external contact to explain the critical transition from Villanovan to Etruscan society in the eighth century BC. Cristofani's view is typical: 'within iron age villages . . . class differences came into being at an early stage, as a result of contacts with the Phoenicians and Greeks'.[155] Undoubtedly the appearance of Greek imports and the evidence for Greek craftsmen resident in Villanovan centres coincide with the evidence for much more drastic social stratification than hitherto. But did the arrival of Greek traders stimulate the emergence of powerful chiefs, or was the existence of powerful chiefs in southern Etruria the reason why the Greeks chose to trade with them? The obvious problem in trying to separate the chicken from the egg is

155 Cristofani, 1979b: 30

that the rich burials and the Greek imports are contemporary – in fact, of course, the latter date the former given the precision of Greek ceramic chronologies. However, it does seem unwise to use Greek and Phoenician trade as a simple *deus ex machina c.*750 BC, given the clear evidence from both the settlements and the cemeteries for an accelerating process of social intensification during the ninth century, that in turn can be understood in the context of the important cultural transformations of the Late Bronze Age. Greek contact must be regarded as fundamentally a symptom of Villanovan social intensification rather than its cause, just as initial European contact accelerated social intensification amongst indigenous North American societies rather than caused it.

That being so, can we explain, rather than simply describe, the process of social intensification in Etruria? In addition to the development of centralized spatial organization, the intensification in production and the emergence of more rigid personal ranking between 1000 and 700 BC, interactions *between* local centres may have been particularly critical. Renfrew and Cherry[156] have argued that such competitive interaction between neighbouring chiefdoms is likely to have been the critical stimulus of early state formation. The examples which they cite of the processes that might have been involved in such 'peer polity interaction' range from the expansion of one polity's ideological system at the expense of others, competition in the construction of public works and increasing levels of exchange, to outright warfare. The Greek city states developed at about the same time as the Etruscan city states, and several scholars have argued that there is much evidence for such competitive interaction amongst the preceding iron age societies in Greece.[157] A similar variety of expressions of increasing 'ritualized friendship' can be discerned amongst late bronze age Villanovan and early Etruscan societies. Whilst we are still a long way from understanding why the Etruscans developed as they did, it is at least clear that the patterns of cultural change in Etruria between 1000 and 700 BC have many parallels with those of Greece over the same period. The formation of the Etruscan city states needs to be understood most of all as a parallel trajectory of state formation to that of Greece, not as one that only took place in the aftermath of the Greek experience.

156 Renfrew and Cherry, 1986
157 Morris, 1987, 1991; Snodgrass, 1986; Whitley, 1991

3

Sources and Society

Besides, the Etruscans were vicious. We know it because their enemies and exterminators said so.

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

Greek and Roman sources: early and late

The Etruscans possess little by way of voice, and for the most part their monuments and artefacts have to speak for them. But while keeping the archaeological data in mind, this chapter will be concerned primarily with building up a picture of the Etruscans from the written sources. These fall into two categories: inscriptions, which can provide important but haphazard snippets of information; and the writings of the Greek and Roman authors, which offer more connected historical accounts but which can hardly ever be taken at face value.

We begin with the latter, and with a passage from an early Greek poet that is not without difficulties: 'And Circe, daughter of Helios, Hyperion's son, bore in love to steadfast Odysseus, Agrios and Latinus, noble and strong, who far away in the remote holy islands ruled over the famous Tyrsenians.' So Hesiod wrote, in *Theogony* 1011–6. The Etruscans called themselves Rasna or Rasenna; to the Greeks they were the Tyrsenoi/Tyrrhenoi, to the Romans Tusci or Etrusci. The Hesiod passage, which includes one of the earliest references to Tyrrhenians, was probably added in the sixth century BC to the main body of the poem, which was composed around 700 BC.[1] One could argue, from the mention of Latinus, that the passage refers to the Latins alone. However, 'Tyrrhenian' is the usual Greek appellation for the Etruscans; possibly here it embraces both the Etruscans and their southern neighbours as undifferentiated inhabitants of central Italy – which might explain why two rulers are

1 Gras, 1985: 632

mentioned.[2] Equally ill-defined is the geographical setting: although the Tyrrhenians are well known ('famous'), their homeland is localized in only the vaguest terms. As for the mythological genealogy, it was a Greek convention (and presumption) to attribute to most 'barbarian' ethnic groups origins stemming from Greek heroes.

Neither Greeks nor Romans had particular cause to like the Etruscans. When the former were beginning to colonize the western Mediterranean, the Etruscans were already firmly in place to bar their way up the Italian coast, clearly masters of the sea which the Greeks knew as the Tyrrhenian, a mastery that would in later centuries be under constant threat from the Greeks of Sicily and southern Italy. At Rome there were Etruscan rulers for the duration of the Tarquin dynasty and again briefly under Lars Porsenna of Clusium (Tacitus, *Hist.* 3.72.1). Thereafter the Etruscans presented a formidable barrier to Roman expansion northwards, which was penetrated only in the fourth century BC.

Hesiod's Agrios translates as 'savage' or 'wild man', tallying with the early Greeks' perception of the Etruscans as pirates to be feared. It is the image of them that is presented in the seventh Homeric Hymn, probably also of the sixth century BC, which tells of the Tyrrhenian pirates' capture of Dionysos. Although – as we shall see – there were populations known as Tyrrhenoi in other parts of the Mediterranean far from Italy, later Roman versions of this story assume that it is the Etruscans who were involved. The earliest unambiguous illustration of the god's punishment of his tormenters, whom he turned into dolphins, is on an Etruscan black-figure pot of the late sixth century BC.[3]

Literary references to Etruria which are contemporary with the early Etruscans are very few indeed. Rather more numerous are those that refer to early times but which were written very much later. Most plentiful of all are those that were written late, often in the late Roman Empire or later, and refer to the latest periods of Etruscan history. The value of the second and third categories depends almost entirely on the quality of any earlier sources consulted by the authors.

A small clutch of references of the second kind takes us back to early Tarquinia and concerns the arrival of the Corinthian exile Demaratus.[4] Clearly the accounts are only in part reliable at best, but a combination of the passages in Polybius, Livy, Pliny and Tacitus

2 West, 1966: 433–6
3 Spivey and Rasmussen, 1986
4 Blakeway, 1935

(written between the second century BC and the second century AD), gives a narrative of a man who had made his wealth through trade with the Etruscans, was then forced out of Corinth for political reasons in the mid seventh century, and settled in Etruria bringing with him craftsmen who introduced to the Etruscans the art of modelling in clay. His son married a Tarquinian lady and moved to Rome, where he succeeded in becoming the first of the Tarquin kings.

This is certainly a long train of events, but there is nothing inherently improbable about any of it. So, for example, modelling in clay would include the skills involved in making roof tiles and architectural terracottas: the earliest tiled roofs known are at Corinth, of the first half of the seventh century BC, and it looks very much as if the idea was introduced into Etruria in the middle of the century.[5] However, Tacitus introduced one other element into the story, that it was Demaratus who taught the Etruscans alphabetic writing, and archaeology can at least disprove that. Corinthian influence may explain the use of the crescent gamma (Ↄ) and the sibilant *san* (M) in Etruria (fig. 30), but there is general agreement that the primary source of the Etruscan alphabet is colonial Euboean from Pithekoussai (Ischia). The earliest inscriptions are in any case earlier than Demaratus by some generations. Demaratus himself seems a plausible enough figure, one of many Greeks who did well out of the trading with Etruria.

To the following century belongs an illuminating inscription written on a stone anchor by another Greek who may have made good in this way. Found at the port of Graviscae and now in the Tarquinia Museum, it reads: 'I belong to Aeginetan Apollo. Sostratos, son of (. . .), had me made.' The author of this dedication is probably the same Sostratos from Aegina mentioned by Herodotus as one of the most successful of all sea-traders. But that he should also be the same man who scratched the undersides of many Athenian pots from Etruria with the trademark SO is too great a coincidence for most to swallow.[6]

Kingship and nationhood

Mentions of kings of individual cities are numerous. Although many float in a chronological vacuum, there is some evidence to suggest

5 Wikander, 1993: 160; but see also p. 165

6 Sostratos in Herodotus: Johnston, 1972; scepticism concerning link with SO marks: Gill, 1994: 101

Transcription/ phonetic value	Seventh century south Etruscan (Caere)	Seventh century north Etruscan	Hellenistic south Etruscan	Hellenistic north Etruscan
a				
c (k)				
e				
v				
z				
h				
θ (th)				
i				
k				
l				
m				
n				
p				
q				
ś				
r				
s				
ś				
t				
u				
φ (ph)				
χ (kh)				
ṡ				
f				

Figure 30 Chronological and regional alphabet chart. (Not all variant letter-forms are shown)

that kingship persisted for a long time in some Etruscan city states, long after it had been abolished in Rome and most parts of the Greek world. Several kings from Veii are known by name, and one, Lars Tolumnius, was defeated and killed by the Romans, according to Livy, in the 430s or 420s BC.[7] Livy also recorded (5.1.3) that in appointing their last king a generation later, the people of Veii succeeded in alienating the other Etruscans for whom kingship was by now an anathema and who allowed Veii to be destroyed by Rome without coming to its aid; though he may here simply have been reflecting contemporary Roman distaste for monarchy in general.

The nature of royal power is a matter for speculation, but presumably it included high priestly office and leadership in war. More is known about kingly regalia, thanks especially to a passage in Dionysius of Halicarnassus (3.61). The king was distinguished, among other trappings, by a purple robe, an eagle-topped sceptre and an ivory throne which visual representations suggest was in the form of a folding stool (though the setting for it is by no means always regal). In processions he was preceded by a magistrate carrying the *fasces*, a bundle of rods with an axe in the centre, symbolizing the power to punish and execute and showing that the king was also supreme arbiter in matters of justice. Much of this paraphernalia, along with its inherent symbolism, was passed on to the consuls of the Roman Republic via the Etruscan kings of Rome.

Not all the 'kings' we hear about seem to have held their authority constitutionally. The picture that Virgil (*Aeneid* 8) paints of Mezentius of Agylla (an originally Greek name for the city of Caere, modern Cerveteri in southern Etruria) is of a leader with little support from among his people, a monster who tortures and kills his enemies by attaching their living bodies to rotting corpses (an accusation made against the Etruscans in general, and Etruscan pirates in particular, that goes back as far as Aristotle). The common view has been that he is an entirely fictitious creation, though more recently Gras[8] has made a concerted attempt to show that behind the image lies a sixth century historical character.

Thefarie Velianas, another leader of Caere, certainly existed, though his constitutional position is again problematical. Nothing was known about him until 1964, when three inscribed gold tablets dating to about 500 BC were excavated at Pyrgi. One of them provides the only Phoenician/Punic inscription so far found in Etruria

7 Ogilvie, 1965: 558
8 Gras, 1985: 454ff

and offers considerable help in construing the longer of the Etruscan texts.[9] Together they record a dedication made by Thefarie, a gift possibly of a statue and probably also of the earlier of the two temples on the site (Temple B) which dates to this period. The Phoenician text styles him king of Kysry (Caere, the Etruscan name for which was Cisra) and mentions the beneficiary of his gift as the Phoenician goddess Astarte. She is given her Etruscan name Uni in the other text, which also refers to him not as king but *zilac/zilath*, the title of the highest annual magistracy, but which he seems to have held for three years in succession. Both inscriptions talk of the gift in terms of a thanks-offering for services rendered by the goddess, which many commentators have interpreted as enabling Thefarie Velianas to seize power, possibly through the agency of Carthaginian backers.[10] Clearly relations between Carthage and Etruria (especially Caere) were close in the sixth century: the two peoples cooperated closely in driving the Phocaean Greeks out of Corsica (chapter 4, p. 137); a close trading treaty between the two mentioned by Aristotle (*Politics* 3.5.10–11) may well belong in this period; while Carthage itself has produced a 'visitor's card' in Etruscan, consisting of a short introductory inscription on ivory for use in Etruria by a Carthaginian merchant.[11]

We rarely hear of kings with wider jurisdiction than over a single city, though Lars Porsenna took on something approaching national importance in trying to restore the Tarquin dynasty at Rome at the end of the sixth century. Arimnestos, who has gone down in the records as the first non-Greek to make a dedication to Zeus at Olympia, is styled simply 'king of the Tyrrhenians', presumably because Pausanias (5.12.5) did not know any further details of his city or did not bother to record them. However, Livy and others are insistent that there was a mechanism whereby the Etruscans could come together to elect a national leader: at the meetings of the *concilium Etruriae* (which seem to have been annual) at the Sanctuary of Voltumna (Fanum Voltumnae), delegates of the League of Twelve Cities could elect one of their leaders to the supreme position. This office, which in Etruscan and Roman inscriptions is probably what is meant by *zilath mechl rasnal* and *praetor Etruriae* respectively, may normally have been simply titular, or it may have been concerned primarily with the religious aspects and organization

9 Bonfante and Bonfante, 1983: 53ff
10 Pallottino, 1975: 90
11 Cristofani, 1991b: 72

of the annual meetings. Dionysius (3.61), however, speaks of the command of joint military forces being entrusted to a supremo, to whom were handed the twelve *fasces* of the individual cities, though there is little evidence that this happened on any regular basis.

There has been endless discussion about which cities may have belonged to the League; possible candidates are more than twelve in number and its composition may have been a shifting one over the generations. Much effort, too, has been expended on attempting to locate the site of Fanum Voltumnae, where the meetings seem to have been part of an important festival with games and a fair. They continued to be held in the late Roman Empire in the territory of Volsinii (Bolsena), but the major fixtures on the site may have been very few, the crowds of participants having camped in tents. The Panionion in Ionia, with which comparisons are sometimes made, preserves only an altar and a few rows of rock-cut benches.

In this area, as in many others, the correlations between written sources and archaeology are poor. So far the burial place of no known king has been discovered, though the area around Chiusi has been combed for the fabled tomb of Porsenna described by Varro. There are many 'princely burials' from the seventh century BC, when kingship was probably the norm, but without inscriptional or very obvious iconographic evidence, there is no means of proving that any of these are burials of rulers. However, it must be from the families to which such tombs belong that the early rulers of the Etruscan communities were drawn.

Religion

As I have already said, the Athenians are far more devoted to religion than any other people. (Pausanias, 1.24.3)

So the nation [the Etruscans], whose devotion to religious matters exceeded that of any other people and was matched by their skill in the conduct of them, . . . (Livy, 5.1.6)

The first statement has received scant comment, the second is often quoted as a great truth. Pausanias' remark, made in the course of a description of the innumerable cult places of Athens, has not altered the common perception of the Athenians as a people concerned with rationality and logical argument, with humanistic ideals rather than with intercourse with the supernatural. Livy's words, on the other hand, are felt by many to go to the heart of Etruscan

preoccupations, reinforced as they were by other ancient writers, including Arnobius, who wrote of Etruria as 'the mother and creator of superstitious practices'.

In point of fact there is much truth in the assertions of both Pausanias and Livy, but at the same time there was nowhere in the ancient world where cult and 'superstition' (Arnobius was writing from a Christian standpoint) were not of great importance. Athens, as well as being host to great numbers of cults connected with the Greek pantheon, was rife with soothsayers and oracle-mongers, and Aristophanes made fun of a good many in his plays. Rome, too, was replete not only with its many official cults and an increasing number of imported ones, but also with astrologers and occultists of all kinds from all over the Mediterranean; so much so that three centuries before Arnobius, the emperor Augustus (Dio Cassius 56.25.5) and his successor Tiberius (Suetonius, *Tiberius* 63) made attempts to restrict their practices. It is clear that many Romans such as Cato and Cicero regarded Etruscan diviners or haruspices, who also operated in the city, as practitioners of the same kind of quackery as the emperors later tried to suppress.

One of the main differences between Etruscan religion and most others of its time is that behind it lay a set body of doctrine which was thought in origin to be the word of the gods. Roman writers refer to it as the *disciplina etrusca*. According to them it was composed of several separate treatises, among the most important of which were the *libri haruspicini* on divining through the examination of entrails, the *libri fulgurales* on interpreting lightning, and the *libri rituales*. An attempt to sketch some of the principles of the first two is made in chapter 7. The last seems to have contained a wide range of material, from rites to be carried out in the laying out of towns and field systems to specific rituals of worship. It has often been suggested that an actual fragment of it is preserved in the longest of the surviving Etruscan texts, written – to everyone's astonishment – on an Egyptian linen mummy wrapping of second century BC date, now in Zagreb,[12] which appears to give in calendar form a list of what offerings are to be made to which gods on which days of the year. In their prescriptive nature and in their attention to the minutiae of observances, the *libri rituales* may be compared very loosely with the statutes of the Law of Moses in the second to fifth books of the Old Testament.

It should be stressed that references to the *disciplina etrusca* are very scattered and of late date, and it may well be that it was only

12 Roncalli, 1985

in the very latest period of Etruscan literary activity – around the first century BC – that most of it was composed in the form in which Roman and Greek writers knew it in translation. This may partly explain the fatalistic tone of some of its contents, in particular the doctrine of Great Generations (*saecula*) of variable duration lasting up to well over a hundred years each, and of which the Etruscan nation had only ten allotted to it.[13] Plutarch (*Sulla* 7) seems to imply that the eighth ended in 88 BC, while other sources say that the ninth lasted only until 44 BC; but the earliest source for the *saecula* is Varro (quoted by Censorinus in the third century AD), who stated that the eighth was still in progress when the records were written down. It is therefore conceivable that the whole system was thought up retrospectively to explain in cosmic terms what was already very apparent by the second and first centuries BC: that the Etruscans as an ethnic entity were at their last gasp.

One does not have to look far to see why the Etruscans have gone down in history as being so obsessed with matters religious. The *saecula* doctrine apart (and even that has some correspondences with Hesiod's Ages of Man), there is little in the area of religion that cannot be matched in some way with Greek practice. In the Greek world, too, appropriate rituals were necessary to accompany most actions of any consequence, public or private, whether founding and laying out a colony, opening a meeting of the town council or even commencing a drinking and dining 'symposium'. Early Rome, however, seems to have borrowed many of its procedures from the Etruscans, especially in the sphere of divination, and in this field alone the Romans regarded them as their superiors, employing their priests and haruspices on a regular basis to assist them in seeking out and interpreting signs from the gods.

The position of the haruspices was given a considerable boost by the emperor Claudius when he revived their ancient colleges by decree (Tacitus, *Annals* 11.15), and they continued to be consulted at Rome for centuries afterwards. If a Livy or a Seneca of the early Empire had been asked to summon up a picture of *contemporary* Etruscans, it is the learned haruspices, steeped in their arcane specialism, who would have sprung quickest to mind, for there simply were no others around who were visibly keeping Etruscan traditions alive. Such writers, writing about the Etruscans in their heyday centuries earlier, would have found it very difficult, almost impossible, not to project backwards the image of a society dominated by haruspication and the *disciplina etrusca*.

13 Pfiffig, 1975: 159ff

Etruscan sources and writing

In addition to the snippets by Greek and Roman writers, there is information to be gleaned from the surviving Etruscan texts. About 13,000 inscriptions are known to date, most of them published in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Etruscarum* (*CIE*), with new additions reported annually in the journal *Studi Etruschi*. The great bulk of them are funerary in nature, a few of the longer ones liturgical. Truly historical documents such as the Pyrgi plaques are conspicuous by their scarcity.

The Etruscan language is only imperfectly known, but given the limited scope of the material for study, it is remarkable how much headway has been made in understanding it – the result of much hard work by numerous, mainly Italian, researchers. What are hoped for now are longer and more varied texts, plus a sprinkling of Etrusco-Roman bilingual texts, hopes that may well be fulfilled in the future as excavators continue to concentrate more on urban and sanctuary sites. The crucial period is the third to first centuries BC when Etruria was under Roman rule and when there is likely to have been a need for commemorative, dedicatory and even proclamatory inscriptions in both languages. Such a scenario may seem unlikely to some,[14] but the prospect of new finds is an exciting one.

Etruscan is the only non-Indo-European language of ancient Italy (see chapter 2, p. 80), and its uniqueness was noted by ancient writers. The only language so far known that is remotely similar, apparently spoken on the Aegean island of Lemnos in the archaic period, survives only on an inscribed tombstone (fig. 31) and on incised pottery sherds. The script is very close to archaic Etruscan; the language is not itself Etruscan but is clearly a not-too-distant relation of it and even shares the same formula for expressing a person's age.[15] Consequently, one school of thought views Lemnos as an Etruscan outpost for trade and piracy,[16] even though no other Etruscan material has as yet been found there. Interestingly, Thucydides (4.109) said that the island was inhabited by Tyrrhenians; but in this context these were a branch of the Pelasgian race who inhabited the Aegean area in pre-Hellenic times.

Herodotus (1.57; 6.136) recorded that the Pelasgians spoke their own language and that they were in possession of Lemnos until it was

14 Wilkins, 1990: 68
15 Script: de Simone, 1994; language: Heurgon, 1989
16 Grant, 1980: 57; Gras, 1976

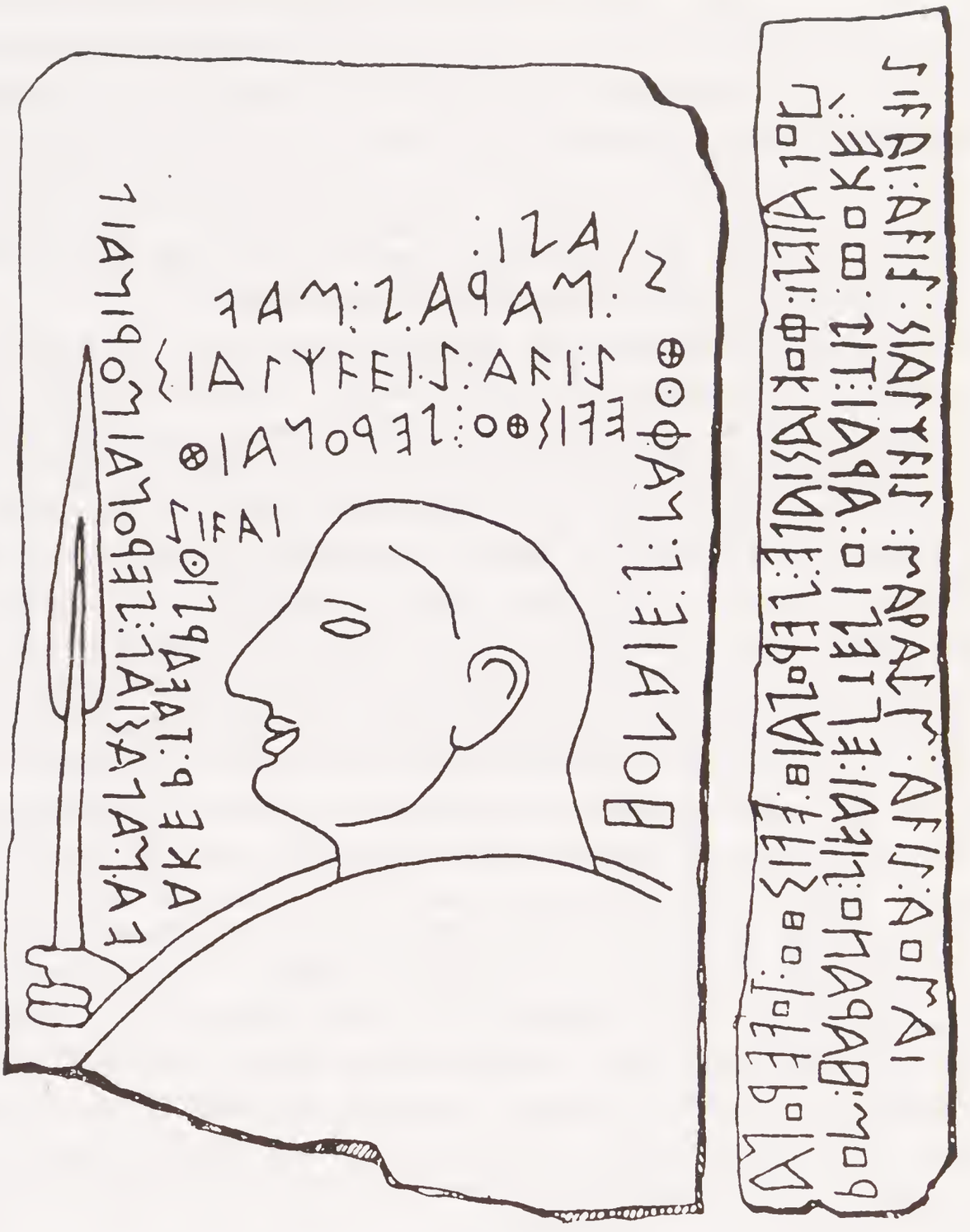

Figure 31 Inscribed stone stele from Lemnos, sixth century BC*, in the National Museum, Athens. (After Bonfante and Bonfante, 1983: fig. 4)*

overrun by the Athenians in the early fifth century BC. Further, he appears to add that there were Tyrrhenian communities living in northern Greece in his own day. In the fourth century BC and later, Greek references to Tyrrhenians in the Aegean proliferate, especially in the context of piracy,[17] and it seems probable that they are remnants of these same populations. To the Greeks, then, *Tyrrhenoi*

17 Giuffrida Ientile, 1983; Musti, 1989

had several meanings: the Etruscans of central Italy; a related ethnic group spread thinly in the Aegean area; and (possibly, by extension) any non-Greek-speaking community of the Aegean or Italy with a penchant for piracy. Putting this evidence together, it is possible to come up with a picture of the Etruscans as part of a wider group of non-Indo-European speakers who once occupied large areas of the Mediterranean, the only part to survive later population incursions substantially intact into the historical period.

Most books on the Etruscan language begin with a discussion of the script,[18] which presents few problems in reading; as most shorter inscriptions consist in the main of personal names, they can be understood without a great depth of linguistic knowledge. The letter-forms are of western Greek type, and their likeliest source is the island of Ischia (p. 87). The earliest Etruscan inscriptions are from around 700 BC, and until recently these were the earliest of any kind from central Italy, but an inscription in Greek letters is now known from the early iron age cemetery at Osteria dell'Osa in Latium, too short to make certain sense, but which pushes knowledge of the Greek alphabet back to within the first half of the eighth century BC.[19] For the history of the alphabet, the Phoenician/Euboean community on Ischia now begins to look doubly important, both as the likeliest base of those Greeks who transmitted it to central Italy and the Etruscans, and also as one of the places where the Greeks may have learned it from the Phoenicians in the first place.[20] The Osa pot was found in the grave of a woman, and perhaps either she or whoever scratched the letters was a Greek from further south. It will be interesting to see for how long it remains an isolated find from the region including not only Latium, where early inscriptions are very few, but also southern Etruria, where it is far more likely that other early written material will turn up.

There are about 120 Etruscan inscriptions from the seventh century BC. Some of them are in the form of learning aids such as alphabets and syllabaries, which include Phoenician/Greek letters that were never needed to reproduce Etruscan sounds. It is remarkable that these 'model' alphabets continue to the end of the century. Otherwise such letters – including the signs for *b*, *d*, *g* and *o* – were dropped immediately, and even within the century certain of the remaining letters began to undergo small changes.[21] In later centuries

18 For example: Bonfante and Bonfante, 1983; Cristofani, 1991a; Pallottino, 1975
19 Bietti Sestieri, 1992: 185; Ridgway, 1994
20 Holloway and Holloway, 1993
21 Colonna, 1970

there were more modifications and even the appearance of one or two new signs. This development, combined with some regional variation of the alphabet (which concerns in particular the use of *k* and *c* and the signs for the various sibilants), makes it possible to separate out, at least roughly, northern from southern inscriptions, and late from early (fig. 30).

Most early Etruscan writing, like the earliest Greek, runs from right to left. But whereas Greek finally settled for the opposite direction in the sixth century, Etruscan persisted with its retrograde script to the end. This might reflect – or might have produced – some difference in the psychology of vision, for it has been suggested that the visual narratives in the art of both cultures do tend to run in opposite directions from each other. Only one area, that of black-figure vase-painting, has been tested, but with statistically interesting results.[22] Another feature that archaic Etruscan and Greek inscriptions have in common is the lack of word separation, though in Etruscan there is a tendency to mark the ends of words with one or more dots or puncts; a similar system marking the ends of syllables disappeared when word division came into use.

It is clear that few people in the seventh century had writing skills, and that those who did were restricted mainly to the ruling class. Inscriptions on objects from 'princely tombs' suggest a symbolic, perhaps even magical, importance by which those who had access to this new power were separated out from those who did not. Some of the earliest texts, from Tarquinia,[23] are scratched on pottery as dedications to gods (here to Uni), a use of writing that never wanes. In the sixth and fifth centuries, the number of inscriptions increases dramatically, a phenomenon that is usually explained in terms of the rise of a new wealthy 'middle class' with writing ability.[24] It is very possible that those making dedications at sanctuaries had their gifts inscribed by priests, who may also have been responsible for inscriptions over tomb doorways, as at Orvieto (fig. 32), and even for those on sarcophagi and ash-urns, though there has yet to be any palaeographic study of hands. However, the wide range of texts on objects for personal use, the many inscribed mythological scenes, the labels on items that were primarily for female delectation such as mirrors (fig. 35), all argue strongly against the view that writing was chiefly in the hands of a priestly caste.

22 Small, 1987
23 Bonghi Jovino, 1986a: 172
24 Stoddart and Whitley, 1988

Figure 32 Crocefisso del Tufo necropolis, Orvieto: chamber tomb with inscription on lintel. (Photograph: G. Barker)

The limitations imposed by the nature of the written evidence can be compared with an attempt, by somone with only rudimentary knowledge of English, to reconstruct the language and society of seven centuries of English history from the survival of inscribed tombstones, numerous fragments of illuminated manuscripts and far fewer of the Book of Common Prayer, inscribed church plate and records of church donations, along with Christmas presents of the upper classes with their gift tags attached. What working vocabulary would he or she be able to build up, and what picture of English life? For Etruscan, the known core vocabulary is therefore small, but it is slowly growing with new finds. Heading the list are proper names of private people, gods, mythological heroes (mainly Greek), cities[25] and some months of the year. Many of the numerals are now known, along with some numerical signs.[26] So, too, are several terms denoting familial relations such as 'father', 'daughter'. The list also includes a number of common verbs, names of vase

25 Pallottino, 1937a
26 Bonfante, 1990: 22, 48

shapes[27] and some rather enigmatic titles of magistracies. Work on the language continues all the time: it has only recently been confirmed, for example, that that most characteristic of vase shapes, the cup with two vertical handles we refer to by the Greek name *kantharos* (see fig. 47, chapter 4, lower right), was actually called a *zavena*.[28]

Social structure

Putting the written evidence together, literary and epigraphic, and combining it with the archaeological, it is extremely difficult to come to definite and uncontroversial conclusions as to how power was exercised within the city states. Even terminology presents major problems. When we published a preliminary report on our field survey around Tuscania, we entitled it, perhaps somewhat rashly, 'The archaeology of an Etruscan *polis*'.[29] It is in fact very questionable whether any Etruscan town and its surrounding territory, even the large ones like Tarquinia, should be given a Greek label that presupposes a social framework embracing political, cult and legal institutions, all of them the result of long development on Greek soil. An additional problem is that the term *polis* conjures up some of the more politically progressive cities like Athens, with their open government, law courts, assemblies and voting rights, whereas it is worth bearing in mind that many Greek *poleis* were controlled by a narrow clique of families or even a single ruler, or were in matters of external policy subject to more powerful neighbours. Many, too, were very small.

In Etruria it is likely that at any one time there would also have been a wide range of political regimes – only not quite so wide, for one hears from no quarter of any move towards democratization. Kingship and tyranny have already been discussed; otherwise the norm was some form of oligarchy. Under the latter, the main offices of state, held probably annually, were those of *zilath*, *purth* and *maru*, which are mentioned in many inscriptions, but most of them admittedly of late date.[30] It is very unclear what responsibilities each had and therefore how we should translate them, but the function

27 Colonna, 1973–4
28 Cristofani, 1989–90: 357–8
29 Barker and Rasmussen, 1988
30 Lambrechts, 1959