

# Etruria and the Origins of the Etruscans



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By

Giovanni Caselli

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To my sister Sara who since age 16 followed me on the hills of Tuscany becoming a Classicist and an Archaeologist in later years.

*If Geography without History seemeth a carkasse without motion so History without Geography wandereth as a Vagrant without a certaine inhabitation.*  
—*W. Gordon East M. A.*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword .....	x
Introduction .....	1
Etruscology in History	
Chapter One.....	5
The Shaping of Etruria	
Chapter Two.....	12
What Does Mitochondrial DNA Say?	
Chapter Three.....	16
The Case of Murlo	
Chapter Four.....	24
The Invasion of the Indo-Europeans	
Chapter Five.....	28
The Language Issue	
Chapter Six.....	30
The Beginnings of Ancient Italy After the Neolithic	
Chapter Seven.....	35
Etruscology and Etruskeria	
Chapter Eight.....	45
The Anthropization of the Natural Environment	
Chapter Nine.....	54
The Controversial Road System of Etruria	
Chapter Ten.....	60
Communications in Ancient Italy	

Chapter Eleven .....	67
Stratigraphic Sequence of the Northern Etruscan Territory	
Chapter Twelve .....	75
Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria	
Chapter Thirteen .....	77
The Economy of the Etruscans	
Chapter Fourteen .....	91
The Religion of the Etruscans	
Chapter Fifteen .....	96
The Fanum Voltumna	
Chapter Sixteen .....	101
The Liver of Piacenza	
Chapter Seventeen .....	105
The Archaeologist and the Detective	
Chapter Eighteen .....	110
The Etruscan City-State	
Chapter Nineteen .....	112
The Inner and External Cities, and the Cities of Po Valley	
Chapter Twenty .....	117
Greek Mythology Comes to Etruria	
Chapter Twenty-one .....	121
The Etruscan Religion in the Hellenistic Age	
Chapter Twenty-two .....	124
Etruscan Mysteries?	
Chapter Twenty-three .....	126
The Etruscans North of the Arno	
Chapter Twenty-four .....	146
The Etruscan Ethnic Area	

Chapter Twenty-five.....	151
Some Reflections on the Identity of the Etruscans	
Chapter Twenty-six .....	155
Etruscan Placenames	
Book List .....	159
Addenda.....	162
• Chronology Explained	
• More on the Language Issue	
• Villanovans	
• Settlements	
• Orientalizing	
• Fanum Voltumna	
• Pisa and the Prince	

## FOREWORD

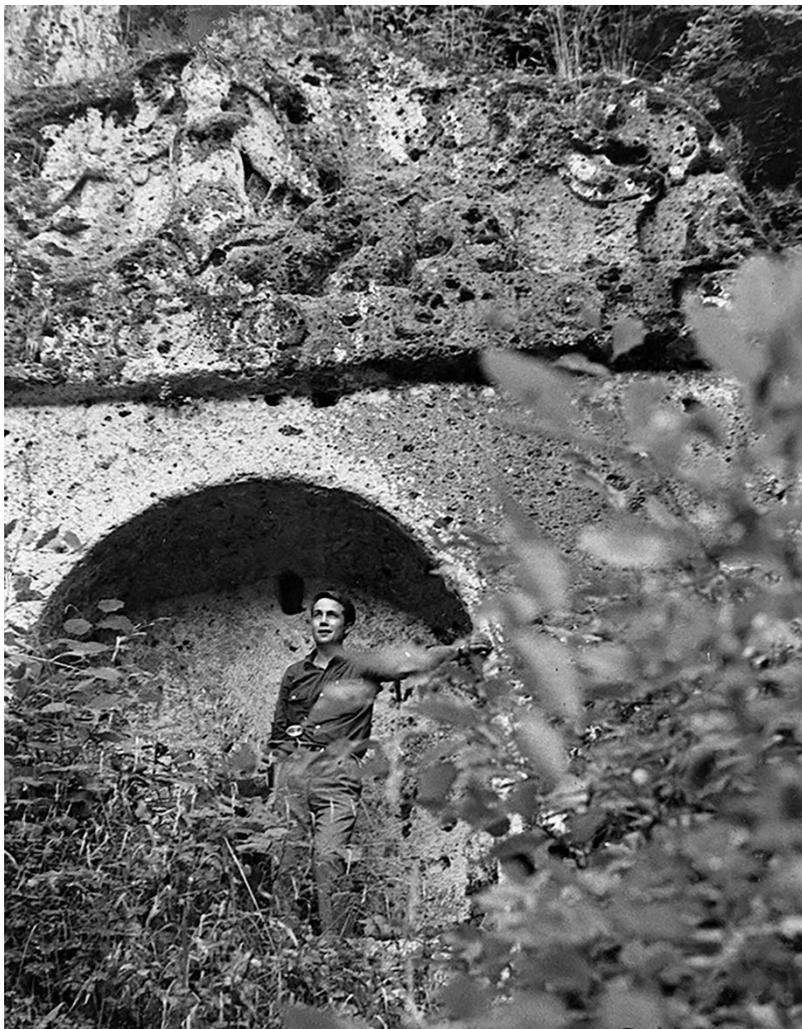
Why continue to write about the Etruscans, of whom too much has already been written by experts and highly knowledgeable people, especially in Italy, almost to the limits of the bearable? In starting to write about the Etruscans we are aware of treading on quicksand because it is a sensitive subject for the modern inhabitants of Tuscany and northern Latium, where most people think they are the descendants of the Etruscans and know best. Unfortunately, Etruscan archaeology has for a couple of centuries been concerned with the treasures buried in the necropolis of Etruria. To make things clearer, I report the words of contemporary Italian scholar Romolo Staccioli, Italian academician and historian, and professor of Roman epigraphy at the Sapienza University of Rome, who I rate as the most important chair of archaeology of my generation in Italy. He says that Etruria covers the western half of central Italy, a region that lies between the Arno and the Tiber. This was the seat or cradle of the Etruscan civilization that flourished from the eighth century BC and lasted until its conquest and absorption by the emerging state of Rome, around the third century BC:

Unfortunately, the Etruscan city is still almost completely unknown to us from the urban and landscape point of view. It would be enough to think that, strictly speaking, we do not even know whether the Etruscan city had a square comparable in its appearance and in its functions to the Agora of the Greeks or to the Forum of the Romans and that we do not know of any building of a definitely public character. (R. A. Staccioli. 2006. *Gli Etruschi: Un popolo tra mito e realtà*. Rome: Newton Compton.)

As a landscape anthropologist, I add that we know nothing of the Etruscan land, its road system, or its important network of waterways, vital for the economic growth of any important city, yesterday as today. Etruscan archaeology has a chance to become a case study for archaeological investigation – I mean “investigation” and not just research – on the genesis and identity of Etruria. Etruscan archaeology, called Etruscology, has

notoriously suffered from a lack of modern multidisciplinary method which is very effective in other cases of complex societies and emerging states of antiquity. A famous 1985 exhibition called *The Year of the Etruscans* clearly demonstrated that settlement research was visibly lacking, and still nothing has been done to this day. A century of research focused only on the graves of the elites has produced a rich but misleading amount of material culture, studied primarily from styles and chronology based on the history of art, tomb architecture, and language – studies chronically tainted by the question of “Etruscan origins” have long suffered from what may be interpreted as antiquarian romanticism.

The British School at Rome, starting from the Tuscania Project in the tradition established by Thomas Ashby (1927, then in the 1950s and 60s with John Ward Perkins, until 1968). The “field-walking” method pioneered by Ashby was extended to excavations of Etruscan, Roman, and medieval sites, with archival research, geo-morphological studies, and geographical studies on the effects of floods in river valleys – research projects that turned out to be the most profound studies of landscape archaeology ever carried out in Europe. This tradition was welcomed by a genial Italian medieval archaeologist Riccardo Francovich, who introduced and applied it at the University of Siena, as I personally observed when participating in it. However, curiously, the method of the British School has largely been applied to medieval studies. This book is heavily influenced by the experience of the British School. I am very aware that whoever writes about the Etruscans must know that if they do not repeat the usual *Is they run the risk of being criticized and accused of talking “nonsense.”* But I believe that the usual clichés are nonsense. The highly esteemed Romolo Staccioli, who published the essay “*The Etruscans: A People Between Myth and Reality,*” says in the revised 2006 edition that over that time, “the new knowledge on the world of the Etruscans obviously did not manifest shocking changes.” But since 2006, the acquisitions caused by David Reich’s study of ancient DNA have marked a turning point in the debate on the origins of the Etruscans, as well as the Romans, the Celts, and other contemporary peoples. In this work, on the basis of my experience, I intend to suggest a different approach to studying the Etruscan civilization.



The author visiting the “Tomba della Sirena”, Sovana 1963

# INTRODUCTION

## ETRUSCOLOGY IN HISTORY

As I began to write, I read the “Etruscology” entry of the Wikiversity (Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the Open University):

Etruscology is the science that deals with the history and civilization of the Etruscans as a whole. It is a discipline that, despite the undoubted and numerous links with archaeology and the history of ancient art, has its own autonomy with respect to both these disciplines. It was Massimo Pallottino, in the second half of the twentieth century, who structured the discipline in strong autonomy. The Etruscan civilization expects the scholar to use, as an expert, all the types of sources available. It must be so for the nature of the sources themselves: abundant [but not recognized as such], unequal and discontinuous.

Adhering to these principles – which, in the light of my sixty years of surveys on the territory, I fully agree with – I take the responsibility of expressing my opinion on Etruria and the Etruscans, not as an academician, but as an expert of the land of Etruria and its heritage. I intend to explain, especially to those who believe themselves to be descendant of the Etruscans, who these ancient people and their land were. In fact, with this work I hope to pass on some of my personal experience to the budding Etruscologists and many enthusiasts who, in Tuscany and elsewhere, are devoted to searching traces of the past in this area to comprehend its unwritten history and rectify the fallacies, since it seems to me necessary to make public something that I believe useful to academicians, hoping to encourage them to look further and take a step beyond tradition.

Woe to the historian who does not walk the land they intend to study, who is not constantly looking for new documentary evidence and new acquisitions that may constitute “evidence” capable of rectifying their history. When one sees university students intent on studying texts that are

over thirty years old, I feel like telling them that they are only studying historiography, or history as it was understood thirty years ago by those who compiled the book.

Urban civilization came to Italy from the Near East and the Aegean between the ninth and eighth centuries BC, and continued to exert a strong influence until the modern age. During the second millennium BC an Eurasian population arrived in Tuscany from north of the Alps to occupy first the Po Valley, then spilling over the Apennines to colonize the hills of Tuscany, starting from the plain of Florence, then the rest of Tuscany and northern Latium. During the Late Bronze Age (1300–1200 BC) this population descended into the plain of Florence-Pistoia from the lower Romagna bordering the Adriatic Sea, by way of the Marecchia river with its estuary in Rimini, with its sources close to the crest of the Apennines, then by two routes running along the Antiapennine system of hills of inner Tuscany, and between the Marecchia and Foglia river basins it reached the Via Maggio and descended into the Tiber valley, and settled throughout that hilly region surrounded by the Tiber, the Arno, and the Tyrrhenian Sea later known as Etruria. Explorers following the Tyrrhenian coastline southwards came ashore to colonize tracts of territory to the south on the coast of Latium and Campania – not yet occupied by peoples from Greece and the Levant who in turn had sailed northwards and planted colonies along the southern coasts of Italy. These civilized people from the Aegean Sea and the coasts of Turkey moved along the Tyrrhenian coasts, spreading the civilization of the Aegean and the Levant throughout Campania, Latium, and Etruria by establishing important commercial and cultural contacts. Early in the first millennium BC the Tyrrhenian coast became frequented by traders interested in metals from Egypt, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, and Urartu (today Armenia) who, sharing a civilization defined as “Orientalizing,” colonized this region and turned it into farmland, and acquired the local language. In a few centuries, the Etruscan civilization developed. From what can be deduced from Etruscology, the Etruscan civilization didn’t have an urban character as such but was a mortuary or cemeterial civilization. We know that the Etruscan colonial cities had an isodromic plan, in imitation of Aegean examples, but we have no example of civic structures such as a forum or agora, basilica, gymnasium, or other civic or public buildings as we find in contemporary Greece or Rome, as Staccioli says. The Etruscan

conurbation had a spontaneous character; the buildings were arranged around an open space of irregular shape constituting several relatively distant nuclei, even if connected and coordinated in a unitary system of an urban style. The character of the settlement, especially in the “Orientalizing” period, was of a tribal type. The “oriental” explorers arrived on the Tyrrhenian coasts, finding farmland much more fertile than any in the Aegean, where the vines, olive trees, and fruit trees that are familiar to us today grew luxuriantly. Above all, these Aegean explorers had long been attracted by the vast mineral wealth of Etruria, which added to the rich farmland of the interior and the Apennine and Tyrrhenian maritime pasturelands, thus, rich cities flourished on the hills along the Tyrrhenian Sea and inland near the internal river routes. Within the area surrounded by the river routes, the ridgeways were trodden by the flocks that in winter poured down from the coasts and the Adriatic slopes of the Apennines, driven by a favourable climate towards the coastal plains between the mouths of the Tiber and the Arno, tracing a network of comfortable routes that formed a commercial infrastructure, and therefore helping the economy of the Tyrrhenian region from protohistory to the modern era based on cattle breeding, agriculture, and mineral resources, as well as thermal waters for the pleasure and health of prosperous landowners, as can be observed in Chianciano and Chiusi. However, we must not imagine an industrialized Etruria, as some authors seem to suggest. The truth is that the bases of all economies from prehistory to the twentieth century are agriculture and livestock farming, as well as copper and iron mines.

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*Museo Civico Archeologico di Chianciano Terme. Comune di Chianciano Terme.*  
Late Etruscan sarcophagus of a noble Etruscan woman

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE SHAPING OF ETRURIA

It was before the period of ethnic formation of ancient Italy at the start of the first millennium BC that the seasonal migratory cycle called transhumance was established and lasted until the twentieth century.

Despite the scarcity of written documents from ancient sources, this phenomenon conditioned the life of Etruria through the millennia. It has been conjectured, erroneously, that transhumance was a relic of nomadism, but the opposite is true: it is nomadism tout court that derives from that semi-nomadic economy characterized by transhumance. But what is transhumance? Trans-humus means moving from one place to another (literally “changing land”), but there is much more to it than that. In the very nature of the transhumance economy lies the answer to the question of whether it was practiced or not, and to what extent in the Neolithic as in the Middle Ages, for which explicit documents are lacking.

As Graeme Barker (Disney Professor of Archaeology; Head of the Department of Archaeology; Director of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research; Professorial Fellow, St John’s College, Cambridge; FBA, FSA, MIFA, and in the 1980s director of the British School in Rome) has suggested, transhumance is one of the economic strategies adopted by livestock farmers for the exploitation of mountainous or marginal areas less suitable for cultivation. If the archaeological sites at high altitudes do not always belong to transhumant shepherds, they certainly indicate seasonal presences and seasonal activities. Ethnoarchaeology demonstrates that any type of exploitation of the mountain is, as a rule, deeply integrated with the agricultural economy of the lower altitudes. As for the Apennines, Pratomagno, and Mount Amiata in inner Tuscany, we find that the shepherds who grazed the high pastures lived in villages at lower altitudes and did not inhabit the mountaintops. This was even more the case in classical antiquity, and although it remains difficult to establish this rule for the

Neolithic period, based solely on archaeological finds, there are no valid arguments to support the contrary. Even for the Middle Ages it remains difficult to establish what actually happened through archaeological data alone, in the absence of precise scientific sources. However, if the notarial documents concerning agriculture and land ownership are studied extensively, the documents concerning pastoralism are not in reality less significant than agriculture or entirely non-existent. The absence of studies and the reluctance of historians do not constitute proof. The problem of whether or not transhumance was practiced in one region or another, in one period or another, has in my opinion been solved by two tests: logical reasoning and science. The existence of a considerable number of sheep or other grazing animals proves that long or short-range transhumance existed. Where sheep existed in very small numbers, there may not have been a need for transhumance, as hay and the leaves of poplar and alder could be harvested in the summer and kept in special barns in sufficient quantities to feed the animals for a whole winter. (The writer personally participated in this operation as a young boy in the 1950s.)



The town of Vetulonia, a hill-town of the Etruscans that from its commanding position enjoyed the view of the Tyrrhenian coast and the winter pastureland. Not very far away the fumes of the metal works of Elba and Populonia were in view.

Professor Graeme Barker observed in the 1970s, when the writer was lucky enough to discuss this issue with him, that the annual amount of rainfall in Central Italy varies from 500 to 3,000 millimetres, depending on the altitude, and the climate is characterized by hot and particularly dry summers in the plains.

Summer aridity is therefore the limiting factor, and this occurs above all in the plains where considerable climatic differences may exist, even between areas close to each other. It is the climate itself

that causes the seasonal intermittence of resources that in any given place are better in a given period of the year rather than in another. In the pastures of the Apennines and Pratomagno at around 1,500–1,300 metres, but also at much lower altitudes in some cases, grazing is available from May to early October. That is to say, from immediately after the melting of the snow to the first snowfalls of the following winter. On the other hand, pasture is available in Maremma from the end of September to mid-May. That is to say, from the first rains that make the grass grow to the arid season that makes it completely dry.

Seasonal grazing also eliminates other negative factors present in the exploitation of low-lying areas, which it would be superfluous to talk about extensively here. Suffice to say that in summer the daily requirement of water for a sheep rises to 5 l, and supplying this need may be difficult in the warmer months. Furthermore, the excessive exploitation of poor pasture causes a deficiency of vitamin A in the sheep, the only essential vitamin for the animal's metabolism. In response to this environmental conditioning, men and sheep together adopted transhumance.

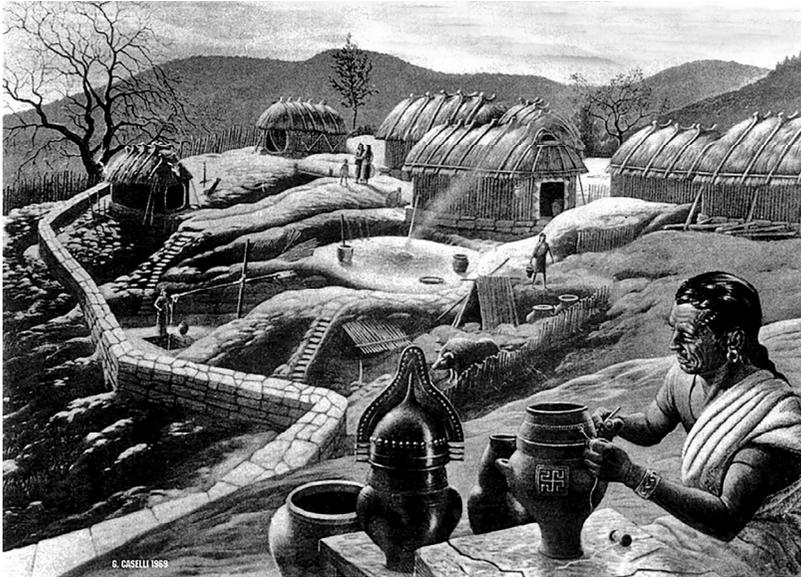
Transhumance therefore has the purpose of grazing the flocks in the plains in the winter and in the mountains in the summer; not only in order to always have green grass available, but also because the animals would otherwise suffer from fatal vitamin deficiencies. The economy and life of the ancient and also modern mountain districts of the Etruscan Apennines have been conditioned by this phenomenon. It should be remembered that the importance of the sheep derives not only from meat, milk, and cheese but also from wool, which is essential to combat the cold winters.

Few seem to know that after a period of crisis during the barbarian invasions, sheep farming, in Western Europe in general, underwent a tremendous increase after the time of the Gothic and Lombard settlements.

From the sixth to seventh centuries onwards, hundreds of thousands of Central Asian shepherds (especially Alani) migrated westwards, establishing themselves along the Apennines and in the Balkans, Sardinia, the south of France, Spain, and Portugal, as attested by written sources of ethnographic and toponymic evidence. The importance of transhumance in the understanding of Etruscan civilization is fundamental for understanding Etruscan culture settlement and communications.

The ethnic genesis of the Etruscans is linked to the physical environment of their region. The eternal human problem of production for reproduction was, as far as the Etruscans and others were concerned, essentially solved by sheep. (L. Aignes Foresti. 1974. "Tesi Ipotesi e Considerazioni" Sull'Origine degli Etruschi" (Dissertationen der Universitaat Graz xxx), xvii, 360. Vienna: der wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaften Osterreichs, 1974. Os 165. Published online by Cambridge University Press. S. K. F. Stoddart. 2007. "The Impact of Landscape and Surface Surveys on the Study of the Etruscans." *Etruscan Studies* 10: 239–45. S. K. F. Stoddart. 2009. "Historical Dictionary of the Etruscans." *Historical Dictionaries of Ancient Civilizations* 24. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.)

Leaving aside the romantic "Etruscan mystery," since the question has long been clarified by the father of Etruscan studies Massimo Pallottino, when in 1947 he convinced the academic world that the Etruscans were native to Italy, spoke a non-Indo-European language, and had settled in the Etruscan area from the Late Bronze Age. In fact, the term "Villanovan" to define the people preceding the Etruscan civilization in this area was replaced by "Proto-Etruscan" by Prof. Ward Perkins in 1959 to underline the continuity of the Etruscan civilization from protohistory to the historical era. Sybille Haynes (2007) wrote that the early Iron Age village civilization from which Etruscan communities developed seamlessly is known as the Villanovan civilization (S. Haynes. 2007. *Etruscan Civilization: A Cultural History*. Los Angeles: Getty Trust Publications).



An artist's impression of a Villanovan village in the hills of Fiesole

Other hypotheses, such as the one that regards the Etruscans as a people who came from the East Mediterranean on the coasts of Campania, Lazio, and Tuscany at the beginning of the eighth century BC, are discarded by most accredited scholars. It is in fact very unlikely that place names (toponyms) in the Etruscan language – more numerous in Casentino and inland north of Tuscany than on the Tyrrhenian coast of Lazio – are attributable to a population of immigrants from the east who occupied territories previously inhabited by Ligurians and Umbrians. The Romans called the Etrusci the inhabitants of northern Lazio and Tuscany and their land *Regio Etruria*. These Etruscans called themselves *Rasenna* or *Rasna*, and the Greeks called them *Tyrrhenoi*. In reality, in these regions, which the Romans and Greeks said were inhabited by the Etruscans or *Tyrrhenoi* at the dawn of history, a population from previous centuries left material remains of a Central European culture that displayed nothing particularly “Ligurian” or “Umbrian.” Therefore, we may call this a supposition. Nobody knows who these ancient inhabitants of Tuscany and part of Emilia, Campania, and Lazio were, whose artifacts, found in archaeological

excavations, have been attributed to a culture called “Villanovan,” from Villanova, a site near Bologna where in 1853 antiquarians found the first artifacts of this kind in Italy.

From the beginning of the eighth to the entire seventh century BC, the finds discovered in the settlements and cemeteries of these regions were instead of clear eastern Mediterranean origin, while in the rest of Europe this same material culture did not change so suddenly but gradually evolved into a culture defined as “Celtic” in Europe and “Scythian” in Eurasia. The Etruscan language in fact belongs to a linguistic lineage preceding Indo-European and survived in these regions or arrived there in embryonic form with the holders of the Villanovan culture. But the most unlikely thing is that this language was imposed by those who spread the “Orientalizing” culture in these regions (as archaeologists define it) between the end of the eighth and seventh centuries BC. Furthermore, there is no trace of this language in any of the regions where the “Orientalizing” culture comes from, nor in other adjacent regions. A stele in a language similar to Etruscan was found on the Greek island of Lemnos, but this does not prove that Etruscan was spoken on this particular island, only that whoever inscribed and erected it did so on the grave of a relative who spoke Etruscan, and the most plausible thing is that this person was a member of a merchant family from Etruria and residing in Lemnos.

The Etruscan civilization – which developed hand in hand with the Greek one in phases called “Orientalizing,” “archaic,” “classical,” and “Hellenistic” – was finally assimilated by the Roman civilization. Rome – originally a city that was Etruscan in all respects, emerging from a cluster of villages built where the Via Tirrenica, coming from the natural ridge of the Tyrrhenian area, crossed the Tiber from Bologna in a central point of the winter pastures of the transhumant Italic shepherds of the Apennines – developed into a large urban conglomerate inhabited mostly by Italics or non-Etruscans.

The cultural singularity of Rome, as a multi-ethnic centre, of people of various origins is noted as a more unique than rare case in the Mediterranean. The heterogeneous inhabitants of Rome who gradually became a “people” by adopting the Latin language – until then spoken by a small tribe in Lazio – giving themselves myths, laws, and a lifestyle accepted almost everywhere, gave birth to a “martial society” dedicated to

the conquest of ever-larger territories whose inhabitants gradually became “Romans,” thus acquiring not the name of a nation but of a city, and adhering to its vision of the world and law. Roman civilization conquered by “Romanizing” the populations of Italy and Europe up to the Rhine and the Danube, and therefore of the Near East, in a similar way to what Islam had to do centuries later. The Etruscans, while losing their political power, maintained their identity, language, and traditions until after the fall of Rome. Their language survived above all in the liturgy and the books of the “haruspices” (the state seers who continued to practice their art until well into the Christian era). Constantine turned to Etruscan haruspices before making his decisions. The Etruscan language probably also survived in the languages of the more isolated agro-pastoral populations of the Apennine mountains, such as around Mount Falterona and in the Alpine valleys around Lake Maggiore. The Po Etruscans had settled in the central Alpine valleys to escape the invasion of the Celts in the fourth century BC. Here and in the Casentino, Etruscan continued to be spoken until the barbarian invasions of the fifth to sixth centuries AD. In fact, there is no Latin phase in the vernacular of Casentino (A. Nocentini. 1998. *Raggiolo: Linguistic Profile of a Casentino Community*. Montepulciano: Le Balze).

Dionysius of Halicarnassus (100 BC) writes instead that the Tyrrhenians were indigenous to Italy, called themselves Rasenna, and were part of an ancient nation “which resembles no other in language, lifestyle and customs.” While the coastal cities of Etruria maintained commercial contacts with every region of the Mediterranean and were also inhabited by colonies of Phoenicians, Greeks, Egyptians, etc., the inland cities were inhabited almost exclusively by Etruscans, as proven by genetic tests carried out on skeletons of the epoch and these could have the strong national character that Dionysius attributes to the Tyrrhenians.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WHAT DOES MITOCHONDRIAL DNA SAY?

Mitochondrial DNA, or mtDNA, is the deoxyribonucleic acid that resides inside the mitochondria, that is the organelles of eukaryotic cells responsible for the very important cellular process of oxidative phosphorylation. Mitochondrial DNA has some similarities with nuclear DNA, such as the double strand of nucleotides, the composition in terms of nitrogenous bases, and the presence of genes. In this DNA, very ancient genetic traits are preserved, and are transmitted directly from mother to daughter.

In an attempt to resolve the dilemma and controversy of Etruscan origins, several Italian and Spanish geneticists have undertaken the analysis of DNA from eighty samples of female bones recovered from Etruscan tombs dating from the seventh to third centuries BC. The results are not conclusive but are nonetheless interesting. They show that the Etruscans were different from other Italians and similar enough to each other to regard them as a homogeneous population.

These tests were carried out on the remains of women and it was statistically established that the entire female population of Etruria was made up of 150 to 200 thousand women. Dividing this number by thirty-six (the number of Etruscan city-states or districts) gives an average of 4,167 to 6,944 women per city-state. Assuming that a family was made up of four individuals, the result would be a population ranging from 600 to 800 thousand inhabitants, and therefore from 16,668 to 27,776 inhabitants per city-state. All this confirms two things: (a) the consistency of the Etruscan people was such as to be able to create a “civilization” with its own characteristics; (b) such a large and genetically homogeneous population could not have immigrated from Lydia or elsewhere.

Some might argue that the alleged immigration consisted only of men – perhaps veterans of the Trojan War – and they joined the women of an alleged local population, but this is a very remote possibility because the

Trojan War (or a major likely war in Troy) took place in the twelfth century BC; that is, before the Villanovan culture appeared. This hypothesis of an immigration of men only today seems to be substantiated with the invasion of the Yamnaya, who, according to the most recent conclusions, killed men and, naturally, kept women (David Reich. 2019. *Who We Are and How We Got Here: Ancient DNA and the New Science of the Human Past*. Oxford: Oxford University Press). It remains only to clarify the chronology of this event. The current population of Tuscany, although genetically very different from the Etruscan, is the closest to it compared to the other Italian populations, however this proximity is more likely due to a consistent immigration of Levantine migrants to the Tuscan cities between the fifth and eighth centuries AD.

This would have brought a high contribution of Mediterranean geniuses to Tuscany. In general, the current Tuscans are strangely similar to the Basques, but this would confirm the conclusions resulting from David Reich's research: Etruscans, Basques, Sardinians, and other peoples arrived in Italy as related populations together with the proto-Indo-European Yamnayas.

It is very unlikely that the Basques have inhabited their current region since prehistoric times, as popular belief would have it, and as several linguists have believed. It is also unlikely that a region so transited and exposed to influence, such as Gascony, could have kept its language intact for around thirty-five thousand years. Basques actually appeared in the region where they are now no earlier than the sixth century AD, and they are in all probability a North Caucasian population of shepherds who arrived in Gascony following the Visigoths of the Alans or the Suebi.

Returning to the Urnfield culture of Central Europe, to which the Villanovan belongs, it must be said that it emerged in the plains north of the Caucasus and from there spread westwards to occupy a region between Austria and Bavaria, and eastwards to occupy a region extending from Pontus to Kazakhstan and China. In Europe the cemeteries of this culture are known as Urnfields and in Asia as Kurgan. It is probable that this culture was acquired by a people who occupied the territory of Milan, Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, upper Lazio, and parts of Campania through trade routes, or that spread by migration through the Alps. We will see that some place names indicate a linguistic link in this sense – think of the Raeti, for

example. Furthermore, in this area cremation was predominant, while elsewhere it was uncommon.

It is true that from a genetic point of view the Etruscans are more similar to the current peoples of the Balkans than to any other current Italian population, including the Murlesians. However, it is to be considered that the material culture of the Urnfields as well as the Villanovan does not represent the product of a genetically distinct people, but the culture of a vast area inhabited by genetically and linguistically different people. Etruscan society was patrilineal or patriarchal. However, the relative freedom of women – who in Etruscan society participated in banquets together with men – scandalized the other Mediterranean peoples who kept their women in strict seclusion. This undoubtedly indicates a cultural influence from the Central Asian steppe (J. Davis Kimball. 2003. *Warrior Women: An Archaeologist's Search for History's Hidden Heroines*. New York: Warner Books).

In historical times the Etruscans appear to be the first people in Italy to have constituted a state with residues of tribal institutional forms. The government remained above any other form of organization, with the power to decide on the life or death of citizens. This state power is symbolized in Etruscan art by the head of the Gorgon Medusa. The unifying force of the state was above all religion. The political unit of Etruscan society was, as in Greece, the city-state that managed a “district” or province. We have numerous names attributable to various state or administrative offices, but it isn't possible to understand which functions certain titles referred to.

These city-states were grouped into twelve as part of three confederations or “leagues.” A confederation was called MECH, and every year the representatives of the twelve cities gathered in a place called FANU to make decisions of common interest and elect the federal head, who was called LUCUMONE and remained in office for a year.

The Etruscan religion was polytheistic and characterized by the belief that every natural phenomenon, be it meteorological, geological, naturalistic, or other, was a manifestation of divine power. This power was distributed among various divinities directly acting on people, who nevertheless had the possibility and privilege of influencing them through rites, sacrifices, and formulas.

Similar to the divinities of Egypt, the Etruscan ones had homologies or contaminations derived from the Hellenic pantheon. The highest deities corresponded to the great pre-Olympic Greek deities; these could be approached personally and nothing was done without first receiving a sign from the divinity. This religion was largely adopted by the heterogeneous people who formed the nucleus of Rome, where both the state and the individual did not take any initiative without first consulting the gods through an intermediary – male (haruspex) or female (nethsra) – who had the ability to “read the signs” of the gods. The most common method was to read these signs in the liver of a sacrificed sheep, practicing a “divination” of Mesopotamian origin.

The Etruscans believed in eternal life in the afterlife, and for this they erected tombs which, unlike the houses, were built in such a way as to last forever. The intervention of the archaeologists was not foreseen! The southern Etruscan-inhabited centres are almost always located in the tufa plateau, on the confluence of two streams that furrow the tuff, delimiting an area with natural defences, or in the non-tuffaceous soils, high up on hilltops or promontories, sometimes up to one thousand metres above sea level and often well-defended by thick walls or ditches. Rome was probably founded by Etruscans on Etruscan soil and according to the Etruscan rite. The city remained Etruscan in all respects until the establishment of the Republic, which marks the epilogue of a true revolution. The oldest architecture in Rome shows that it was an Etruscan city identical to the nearby Falerii, Sutri, Cere, Tarquinia, and, above all, its rival Veio. The drainage system that was part of the Cloaca Maxima still exists today and is an Etruscan work. Therefore, Rome did not develop under an Etruscan influence but as an Etruscan city. This conclusion is substantiated by the fact that the only population capable of founding a city in that area was the Etruscan one: the other populations consisted of tribes of shepherds.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE CASE OF MURLO

During the 1960s, an Etruscan building was discovered in a field called Poggio Civitate in the municipality of Murlo near Siena, described as a kind of “princely palace” of the seventh century BC, which revealed to archaeologists what the “Orientalizing” socioeconomic system of rural Etruria was like. It was a kind of “manor” with the management definable as a sharecropper, where the owner was, in all probability, a prince and a miracle worker – a priest.

It is not known why, during the 1990s, the geneticist Alberto Piazza conducted tests on the current population of Murlo, assuming that they were descendants of the Etruscans of “the palace.” It was already known that, from the genetic point of view, the Tuscans had unique and singular characteristics, and Piazza analysed those inhabitants, who in his opinion showed “non-Lombard” somatic characteristics, to discover through meticulous scientific tests that the Murlesians are similar to the Turks. From the simple fact that the Etruscan palace of Murlo had been destroyed in the fifth century BC in a war, it could be argued that the current inhabitants of the nearby village of Murlo had nothing to do with the Etruscans and if anything with those who defeated them, or with Middle Eastern immigrants who arrived in Tuscany after the Greek–Gothic Wars of the fifth century AD.

But apart from this obvious consideration, those who know the documents know that the Sienese population is almost entirely of relatively recent Levantine and Lombard origins, so it should not surprise anyone if Professor Piazza (1977) discovered that the genes of the current inhabitants of Murlo showed affinity with those of present-day Turks (A. Piazza, R. M. Griffo, and G. Matullo. 1977. “Looking for Etruscan Genetic Traces in Tuscany.” *Etruscan Studies* 4: 65–72).



In the books about the Etruscans appear to have developed an industrial revolution, so much bronze and pottery artefacts fill the museums of Tuscany, Rome and Naples, but nearly 90% of the Etruscans were peasant farmers and shepherds. Their land made them wealthy by producing wine and wool, that enabled them to fill the tombs of their dead with massive fortunes in imported vases and bronzes.

Other research conducted by Professor Guido Barbujani on the skeletal remains of ancient Etruscans yielded similar results. Linguistic affinities between the Altaic and Etruscan languages, due to the antiquity of the Etruscan language, led another scholar, Mario Alinei, to conclude that the descendants of the ancient Etruscans had arrived in Tuscany from the coasts of Asia Minor. In reality, what transpires from these linguistic and genetic sources is the fact that the population of Murlo is if anything of recent Levantine origins, and that the Etruscan language has elements of a substratum in common with the Altaic and Proto-Indo-European as well as Semitic languages (G. Barbujani. 2007. “DNA and Etruscan Origins: Barbujani Guido’s Response to J. Turfa.” *Etruscan News* 8, no. 4).

The population of the Villanovan era was probably composed of local people and invaders from Eastern Europe and Central Asia – a horde of Kurgans, known as the Yamnaya in Ukraine, who like all nomadic peoples were distinguished by their high metallurgical technique.

These are accompanied by people who immigrated from Asia Minor towards the eighth century, carrying the “Orientalizing” civilization. The Etruscan language is therefore that of the ancient Central Asian invaders who formed the Villanovan population.

At the beginning of 2007, a bolt from the blue reached the media which seemed to overturn what had been acquired and consolidated by official Etruscology. This was reported as: “The Origins of the Etruscans,” *New Scientist*, February 14, 2007; “The Origins of the Etruscans,” *The Economist*, February 15, 2007; “DNA Proves that Herodotus was Right about the Origins of the Etruscans,” *The Telegraph*, February 18, 2007; “The Etruscans were Immigrants in Italy,” *New York Times*, April 3, 2007; and “The Enigma of the Etruscans in Italy has Finally Been Revealed,” *The Guardian*, June 18, 2007.

These authors were convinced that a great scientific breakthrough had taken place. At the base of this journalistic scoop were two scientific articles, the first by the geneticist Alessandro Achilli et al., 2007, “The Variations of Mitochondrial DNA in Modern Tuscans Confirms the Middle Eastern Origins of the Etruscans,” in *The American Journal of Human Genetics*, and the second by Maurizio Pellecchia et al., 2007, “The Mystery of the Etruscan Origins: New Clues from the DNA of the Bostaurus,” published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society*.

These two articles appeared in well-accredited journals but were little known to Etruscologists, so the public was attracted to the news that twenty-first century science had unravelled a great mystery. Science challenged the general consensus of archaeologists as a happy conclusion to a long series of DNA studies.

Maurizio Pellecchia et al. examined the bovine DNA sequence from eleven Italian breeds of cows in 2007, finding Middle Eastern haplotypes in Tuscan breeds (M. Pellecchia, R. Negrini, L. Colli, et al. 2007. “The Mystery of Etruscan Origins: Novel Clues from Bostaurus Mitochondrial DNA.” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* 274: 1175–9).

Thinking of the mysterious alleged Middle Eastern origins of the Etruscans, this discovery generated the hypothesis that the Etruscans who emigrated to Tuscany in the Bronze Age brought their cows with them (A. Achilli, A. Olivieri, M. Pellecchia, et al. 2008. “Mitochondrial Genomes of Extinct Aurochs Survive in Domestic Cattle.” *Current Biology* 18, no. 4: