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**In Search of Origins: Making Etruscans Italics and Italics Italians**

Where did the Etruscans come from? Were they Pelasgians, Lydians, Sumerians, Hebrews, Tuscans, Sardinians, Tyroleans, or Hungarians? The question of the Etruscans’ origins goes back to antiquity and is the bedrock of the famous “Etruscan mystery” that has haunted the imagination of archaeologists, linguists, antiquarians, and connoisseurs from the Renaissance to the twentieth century. Among the various—and often rather far-fetched—theories, three have proved particularly persistent. The first theory claims that the Etruscans were of Eastern origin, “newcomers” who left Asia Minor at the beginning of the eighth century and landed on the beaches of Tuscany, where they supposedly provoked the emergence of a new civilization. According to the second theory, which is based on a controversial passage from Livy, the first Etruscans arrived in northern Tuscany from the north of Italy. This argument was formulated during the eighteenth century by Nicolas Fréret, perpetual secretary of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres de Paris, and subsequently relayed by many historians and linguists, including Barthold Georg Niebuhr, Jules Martha, Luigi Pigorini, and Konrad Helbig. The third hypothesis is that of autochthonous or indigenous origins: the roots of the Etruscans lay in Italian soil. This theory also had its roots in antiquity (in the works of Dionysius of Halicarnassus), and gained traction in Tuscany between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, before becoming popular at the national level over the two centuries that followed. In recent decades, the research community has begun to consider the question of the Etruscans’ origins a non-issue (cf. Massimo Pallottino, Dominique Briquel). Why, then, revisit this old problem? It is my belief that if this obsession with origins reveals nothing about Etruscan civilization itself, it can bring to light some of the important political issues at play in the process of constructing an Italian nation.

From the Renaissance to the dawn of the twenty-first century, recurrent efforts have been made in the Italian Peninsula to erase or at least minimize the traces of the Etruscans’ relationship to the East. However, the question of their origin has been reworked and reshaped to various—and sometimes conflicting—political ends. At this stage of my research, I have been able to distinguish at least three different strands of this process: the legitimization of the Medici dynasty, the defense of a republican and federalist politics, and the affirmation of a national continuity across the peninsula (whether in terms of race or of cultural heritage).

A) A local and monarchist interpretation. In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Tuscany, claims about the indigenous origins of the Etruscans often went hand in hand with a categorical rejection of the Roman political system, which was blamed for the destruction of the region’s cultural and material wealth. Cosimo I de’ Medici sought to replace the contentious image of Florentine superiority with that of a shared regional history. As a unifying myth, the Etruscan past served to justify his projects for expansion across the whole of the ancient territory of Etruria. It also enabled him to distinguish himself from the most direct heirs of the Roman tradition, the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire (Giovanni Cipriani, 1983).

B) A local and republican interpretation. A different vision of the indigenous origin of the Etruscans, also current in Tuscany, emphasized their municipal heritage. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Florentine historian Giovanni Villani contrasted the republican organization of the Etruscan leaders or lucumons with the imperial structure of Rome. When the independence of Florence was threatened by the Pope and the House of Visconti in the years that followed, influential figures of Florentine humanism such as Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni drew on the past to incite their fellow citizens to resist external tyranny. Two centuries later, Etruria was invoked as a confederation of twelve aristocratic cities, coexisting in peace and prosperity and thus comparable to the governments of Switzerland and the Dutch Republic (cf. Mauro Cristofani). This republican interpretation survived and was rekindled in the decades that followed, particularly following the success of Giuseppe Micali’s 1810 work, *L´Italia avanti il dominio dei Romani*.

C) A national interpretation. Beyond Tuscany, the theory of indigenous origins was used throughout the eighteenth century to affirm the continuity between the Etruscans and the Romans, sometimes from an anti-Hellenic perspective. Based on the primacy of Rome, this interpretation implied transforming Etruscans into Italians. This was a two-step process: Etruscans became Italics and then Italics became Italians. One of the first proponents of this perspective was Giovanni Battista Piranesi, whose two contributions to the debate date from 1761 and 1769. This retrospective unification of the past was subsequently revived during the Fascist period by avant-garde artists (Mario Sironi), archaeologists (Carlo Anti), and political figures (Alessandro Martelli).

To better understand this repeated attempt to establish the history of Italy on the basis of Etruscan civilization, I emphasize two aspects.

First, it is important to reflect on the different ways that the protagonists of history are constructed within the public sphere. This debate is not confined to specialists alone. Historians, linguists, and archaeologists have of course played a fundamental role, but figures external to academia have also influenced its course, including politicians (from Lorenzo the Magnificent to certain representatives of the Fascist government) and numerous artists and literary figures (such as Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Giosuè Carducci, Sironi, etc.).

Second, it is crucial to analyze the temporal stratification of the debate. The autochthonous interpretation of the Etruscans’ origins resurfaces almost surreptitiously across the decades and the centuries. This is the reason that I foreground a long-term perspective, structured into three stages: the debate in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Tuscany, the debate launched by the works of Piranesi in the second half of the eighteenth century, and its revival between 1920 and 1945. It is as much a question of highlighting repetitions in these interpretations as tracing their variations. In the same way, I believe that it is important to identify the ways that the indigenous interpretation has persisted in Italy after the Second World War, in particular by examining the major exhibitions dedicated to the Etruscans held in 1955, 1985, and 2000.