

Fall 2015

The Unspoken Bond: The Complex Relationship between Etruria and Greece

Christopher S. Saladin

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/classtudent>

 Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Saladin, Christopher S.. "The Unspoken Bond: The Complex Relationship between Etruria and Greece" (2015). *Classics: Student Scholarship & Creative Works*.

<http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/classtudent/2>

This Student Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Classics at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classics: Student Scholarship & Creative Works by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

The Unspoken Bond: The Complex Relationship between Etruria and Greece

Christopher S. Saladin

Abstract

The Greeks of the Archaic and Classical periods clearly knew about and interacted with the Etruscan people, who contemporaneously dominated the Italic peninsula. Yet, despite the evidence of heavy interaction between the two civilizations, there is little mention of the Etruscans in our Greek sources. In this essay, I examine surviving Greek sources to determine the extent of Greco-Etruscan relations and how the Greeks perceived identity. Through my research, I found that the Greek and Etruscan societies were quite interconnected and had a tremendous impact upon each other, yet their interaction with each other remains strangely undocumented and mysterious.

Much of what we know about the ancient Mediterranean world comes from the Greeks, who provide us with more information about themselves than any other civilization before them. During the Archaic Era, the Greeks began to write down their stories and what they observed in the world around them, which led to the birth of history and literature. Meanwhile, in the Italic peninsula, the Etruscan people, known to the Greeks as “Tyrrhenians,” were also thriving. However, despite evidence indicating that they were a large and prosperous civilization, the Etruscans don’t provide us with the abundant written evidence we have from Greece. Furthermore, our Greek sources make relatively little mention of the Etruscans, even though the material record suggests the two cultures were well aware of each other. So what was Greece’s relationship with Etruria and how much did they really know about their neighbors in Italy? To answer this question we must examine what little written evidence we have and compare it to the material record. Most Greek sources mention the Etruscans when discussing their origins, but we can also infer that they traded with them frequently, interacted with them on the high seas, and encountered them all over the Mediterranean. These particular insights reveal that the Greeks and Etruscans had a much more complex relationship than the sources would suggest at first glance.

The most detailed descriptions of the Etruscans we have from Greek sources are in reference to their origin as a nation, which was a highly debated topic in antiquity. In his *Histories*, Herodotus, who was writing during the second half of the 5th Century BC, tells the story of how the Etruscans migrated to Italy from Lydia. He recounts that, due to a terrible drought, half of the Lydian population was chosen by lot to leave Lydia under the leadership of the king’s son, Tyrsenos. This group relocated to Italy and renamed themselves “Tyrsenoi” after their leader.¹ Herodotus claims to have been told this story by the Lydians themselves and makes

¹ Herodotus. *History of the Persian Wars*, 1.94.

only one other reference to the Etruscans in his entire history. While this does not confirm any communication with the Etruscans, the casual manner in which Herodotus refers to them suggests that he was familiar with them as a Mediterranean people. In fact Herodotus would have almost certainly known about them because he joined the Greek colony at Thurii in southern Italy, which was not far from Etruscan controlled lands. Herodotus dedicates a significant portion of his history to describing other peoples' customs and does so for almost every non-Greek people. Therefore it is very strange that Herodotus does not tell us anything else about Italic peoples, considering his likely contact with them. Since their origin story seems to be from a Lydian source and there is no other mention of them in the entire *Histories*, Herodotus, as odd as it is, really must not have known many details about the Etruscans.

Despite the briefness of his account, Herodotus' origin story became quite popular throughout the Greek world, but also quite controversial. Centuries later, around the end of the 1st century BC, the historian Dionysus of Halicarnassus chimed into the debate over the Etruscans' origins. Dionysus argues that the Etruscans were native to Italy and, in contrast to Herodotus, that they couldn't possibly be Lydians. He writes, "Those probably come nearest to the truth who declare that the nation migrated from nowhere else, but was native to the country, since it is found to be a very ancient nation and to agree with no other either in its language or in its manner of living".² Whether Dionysus is right about the Etruscans' origins or not, he makes a very important observation: the Etruscans have a completely unique language and culture. Dionysus was writing during the beginning of the Roman Empire, centuries after the Romans consolidated power across all of Italy, but he can still refer to a distinctive culture and language in Etruria. Evidence of the Etruscan language dates well into the Roman period, which shows the

² Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*. I. 30, 2.

Etruscan culture was distinct and influential. However, Dionysus' account is the only Greek source that mentions Etruscan customs, yet he fails to describe their details. So, while the Etruscans were certainly known and recognized as a unique people, no one writing in the ancient Mediterranean world seems to have known what made them culturally distinctive.

If the written record was all we had, then we would probably assume that the Greeks and Etruscans had very little to do with each other. However, the material evidence indicates otherwise. An enormous amount of Greek pottery, nearly 30,000 pieces, have been discovered as grave goods in Etruscan tombs. This Greek pottery, most of which was produced in Attica between the 6th and 5th Centuries BC, must have made its way into Etruria through a large overseas trading network connecting Greece with the Italic Peninsula. In his essay "Why did Athenian Pots Appeal to the Etruscans," archaeologist Robin Osborne discusses the prevalence of Greek pottery in Etruria and what it says about their aesthetic taste. When discussing a particular type of Athenian amphora, Osborne writes, "some 87 percent have been found at Etruscan sites; they are distinct not just in shape but in imagery, being given to scenes of explicit sex and violence".³ Osborne argues that the high frequency with which this specific type of vase is found in Etruria suggests that the Athenians were producing pottery specifically for the Etruscan market. This means that Greek potters and merchants must have been in frequent contact with the Etruscans and even knew what types of imagery appealed to their cultural tastes. Other evidence suggests that some Greek artisans immigrated to Italy to specifically produce Attic replicas for the Etruscan market, which means that some Greeks would have been living among the Etruscans themselves. In fact the Greeks had such a big influence on Etruscan art that

³ Osborne, Robin. "Why did Athenian Pots Appeal to the Etruscans?". *World Archaeology*, Vol. 33. 2, 277-295. Taylor & Francis, Oct. 2001. 278.

many scholars argue that their culture was essentially “Hellenized” during the 6th and 5th Centuries BC.⁴ The degree to which the Etruscans incorporated Greek themes into their own material culture shows a vast and complex interconnectedness between these two peoples.

While it is clear that the Etruscans were heavy consumers of Greek products, it is somewhat harder to tell what they traded to the Greeks in return. We have a vast amount of intact artifacts from the Etruscans because they buried their dead in chamber tombs full of grave goods, but these sorts of tombs were less common in Greece. From the Etruscan tombs, we can tell that they produced many of their own goods in addition to what they imported from Greece. The Etruscans seem to have been master metal workers, as vast amounts of intricately worked bronze artifacts have been discovered in their tombs. The Etruscans probably traded these bronze products to the Greeks, as there is some material evidence of Etruscan imports. A decent number of these bronzes have been found in Greece, most notably in the sanctuaries at Dodona, Delphi, and Olympia.⁵ These products prove that the Etruscans were trading with the Greek mainland, but they do not tell us anything about the extent of this trade.

While the presence of some Etruscan artifacts in Greece does not prove they were heavily imported, there is textual evidence that suggests this was the case. In his work the *Deipnosophistae*, Athenaeus of Naucratis quotes the famous 5th century BC Athenian tyrant Critias as saying, “the Etruscan cup of beaten gold is the best, as well as all bronze that adorns the house...”⁶ From this reference we can infer that the Athenians were well acquainted with Etruscan bronzes and even decorated their homes with them. Other references in Greek literature suggest that the Etruscans were best known for their bronze trumpets. In his essay “The

⁴ Torelli, Mario, ed. *The Etruscans*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2001. 141.

⁵ *Ibid*, 397.

⁶ Athenaeus. *Deipnosophistae*, I. 28, b.

Invention of the Tuba (Trumpet),” John Ziolkowski discusses why the Etruscans were closely tied to the invention of the ancient trumpet. He mentions that most ancient sources give the Etruscans credit for inventing the trumpet, even though archaeological evidence suggests that the instrument was actually created by the Gauls.⁷ The 2nd century AD geographer Pausanias claims, “Tyrsenus invented the trumpet, and Hegelos, the son of Tyrsenus, taught the Dorians with Temenus how to play the instrument”.⁸ This suggests that the Etruscans, who themselves got the idea from the Gauls, were the ones who introduced the Greeks to the trumpet. Other references to “Tyrrhenian trumpets” occur in Greek tragedy, most notably in the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.⁹ So whatever its true origin was, the trumpet seems to have been brought to Greece by the Etruscans. This is evidence that, while the Greeks likely had a greater cultural impact on the Etruscans, the cultural influence of trade between Etruria and Greece went both ways.

The Greeks were able to trade and colonize all across the Mediterranean because they were largely a sea-fairing people. The Euboeans were among the first Greeks to establish colonies outside of Greece, founding the colony of Pithecusae on an island just off the Italian coast during the 8th Century BC. This colony acted as a trading post with the Etruscans and was crucial in the spread of Greek products to Etruria, but this doesn’t necessarily mean that the Greeks dominated overseas trade to Italy. One of the few things we know for sure about the Etruscans is that they had a formidable naval presence in the early Mediterranean. While there are no detailed descriptions of Etruscan sailors or traders, there are several references that

⁷ Ziolkowski, John. “The Invention of the Tuba (Trumpet).” *The Classical World*, Vol. 92.4, 367-373. Johns Hopkins: Classical Association of the Atlantic States, 1999. 370.

⁸ Pausanias. *Descriptions of Greece*, 2. 21, 3.

⁹ Ziolkowski, 368.

suggest they had long been a sea-faring people. One of the earliest works of Greek literature, the so-called *Homeric Hymns*, written between the 7th and 6th Centuries BC, makes note of the Etruscans. In the “Hymn to Dionysus,” the people who capture Dionysus at sea are referred to as “Tyrrhenian pirates,” which suggests that the Etruscans had been known to commit piracy.¹⁰ This means that, as early as the Archaic period, the Greeks had already encountered the Etruscans at sea.

Talk of these “Tyrrhenian pirates” continued throughout antiquity. Strabo, a geographer during the 1st century BC, writes that the various Etruscan tribes, “took to the sea as pirates, different bands turning to different parts of the high seas,” and when they banded together they were able to, “attack in turn and make long expeditions”.¹¹ These Etruscans sound like naval opportunists who had the capability to conduct full-scale naval expeditions. Strabo again mentions Etruscan naval might when discussing the city of Caere, writing, “Among the Greeks, this city was in good repute both for bravery and for righteousness; for it abstained from all piracy, although particularly well fitted therefor.”¹² Here Strabo tells us that other Greeks have noted the city of Caere for its naval capabilities, but distinguish it from other Etruscan cities for refraining from piracy. This suggests that some Etruscan city-states, like Caere, would have had organized navies under their control with which they could assert their naval power. In fact, Caere’s navy is briefly mentioned by Herodotus in his *Histories*. Herodotus describes the battle of Alalia, which took place between a group of Phocaean Greek colonists and a joint Carthaginian and Etruscan fleet. The Greeks won the battle, but Herodotus mentions that the

¹⁰ *Homeric Hymns*. “Hymn to Dionysus”, 7.8.

¹¹ Strabo. *Geography*, 5.2. 2.

¹² *Ibid*, 5.2. 3.

Etruscans from Caere, who made up the bulk of the fleet, recovered most of their ships.¹³ Here we have evidence that the Etruscans engaged the Greeks in battle and had a strong enough navy to hold their own. While the Etruscans certainly had a formidable naval presence in the Western Mediterranean, these are the only Greek references to their sea-fairing capabilities. Needless to say, the Greeks almost certainly encountered the Etruscans at sea more frequently than our sources indicate.

In fact the Etruscans' naval influence may have stretched all of the way into the Greeks' own backyard, the Aegean Sea. In 1886, archaeologists discovered a funerary stele on the northern Aegean island of Lemnos that appeared to be inscribed in the Etruscan language. In his essay "Herodotus 1.94, the Drought ca. 1200 B.C., and the Origin of the Etruscans," classicist Robert Drews claims that, "there is no doubt about the affinity between Etruscan and the language of the Lemnian inscription... (it) seems to be so close to Etruscan that it can only be called an Etruscan dialect."¹⁴ Drews also argues that the inscription is very close to the dialect observed in Etruria during the 8th to 7th centuries BC, which suggests the Etruscans who inscribed the stele emigrated from Italy to Lemnos sometime during this period. Assuming Drews is correct about this, it seems that the Etruscans had a colony in the Aegean Sea at the same time the Greeks were colonizing all over of the Mediterranean.

The Greek historian Thucydides also attests to an Etruscan presence in the Aegean in his history of the Peloponnesian War. When discussing the inhabitants of the Chalcidice, Thucydides writes, "the greatest part (of them) is Pelasgic- belonging to those Etruscans that

¹³ Herodotus, 1. 166-167.

¹⁴ Drews, Robert. "Herodotus 1.94, the Drought ca. 1200 B.C., and the Origin of the Etruscans". *Historia*, Bd. 41.1, 14-39. Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992.

once inhabited Lemnos and Athens.”¹⁵ Thucydides claims that the Etruscans, who he confuses with Pelasgians, used to live on Lemnos until they were forced to make a short move to the Chalcidice. These Etruscans appear to have been part of the same colony that erected the Lemnian stele, confirming that there was an Etruscan colony in the Aegean. This means that Etruscans were sailing beside the Greeks in their own home sea and likely interacted and intermingled with them on a frequent basis. The Etruscans were practically the Greeks’ neighbors, yet they still make very little mention of them in their history and literature.

In a way it seems that the Greeks were almost ignoring the Etruscans. Greek historians and geographers throughout antiquity spent volumes writing about the geography and history of different peoples and places across the Mediterranean World. So why do they practically glance over one of the peoples that they seem to have interacted with the most? The only logical answer is that the Greeks must not have known that much about the Etruscans in spite of their obvious relationship with them. If this was the case, then it was either because the Etruscans were a relatively closed society or the Greeks just didn’t deem it necessary to inquire about them for some unknown reason. Regardless if either of these conjectures is true, there is still a huge missing piece to understanding the complex relationship between these two peoples. Despite their economic, maritime, and geographic ties, the Etruscans seem to have still maintained a certain mystical quality for the Greeks. In the eyes of the Greeks, the untamed land of Etruria fell more often in realm of myth than in reality.

¹⁵ Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 4. 109.

Bibliography

- Athenaeus. *The Deipnosophists*, 1. 28, b. Trans. Charles B. Gulick. Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1927.
- Dionysus of Halicarnassus. *Roman Antiquities*, I. 25-30. Trans. Earnest Cary. Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1937.
- Drews, Robert. "Herodotus 1.94, the Drought ca. 1200 B.C., and the Origin of the Etruscans". *Historia*, Bd. 41.1, 14-39. Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992.
- Herodotus. *The Persian Wars*, 1. 94, 166-167. Trans. A. D. Godley. Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1920.
- Homeric Hymns*, hymn 7. Trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White. Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1920.
- Osborne, Robin. "Why did Athenian Pots Appeal to the Etruscans?". *World Archaeology*, Vol. 33. 2, 277-295. Taylor & Francis, Oct. 2001.
- Pausanias. *Descriptions of Greece*, 2. 21, 3. Trans. W.H.S. Jones. Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1918.
- Strabo. *Geography*, 5. 2, 2-3. Trans. Horace L. Jones. Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1923.
- Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 4. 109. Trans. Charles F. Smith. Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1920.
- Torelli, Mario, ed. *The Etruscans*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2001.
- Ziolkowski, John. "The Invention of the Tuba (Trumpet)." *The Classical World*, Vol. 92.4, 367-373. Johns Hopkins: Classical Association of the Atlantic States, 1999.