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# TUSCANY, AN ETRUSCAN LAND



Regione Toscana



**TOSCANA**  
PROMOZIONE TURISTICA

*The culture and itineraries of an  
ancient but contemporary people*



# AN ANCIENT CIVILISATION THAT SPEAKS TO OUR HEARTS

**A**ncient Etruscan civilisation is truly fascinating. Its love of life, its deep religious faith, its unusual relationship with the after-life, not to mention the exceptional talent of its artists, goldsmiths and artisans, all meant that it was truly unique. The question of its origins, like the puzzle of its language, intrigued the Greeks and the Romans, who absorbed many of its customs, symbols and institutions.

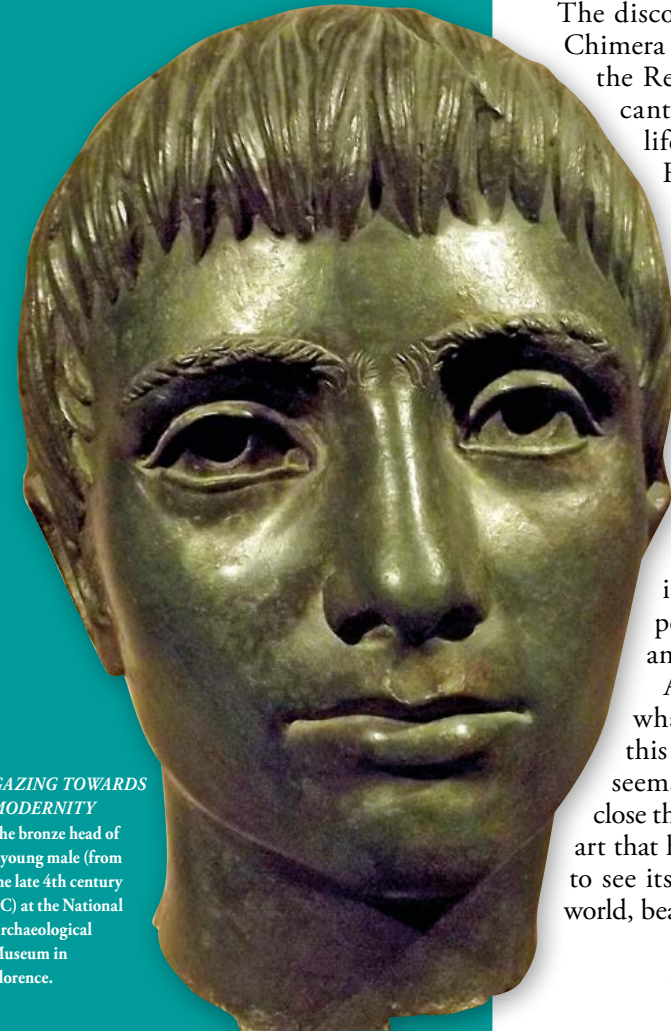
The discovery of the magnificent Chimera of Arezzo at the time of the Renaissance had a significant impact on the cultural life of the Medici court in Florence. Indeed to this day Tuscany considers itself the proud heir of Etruscan civilisation. Several centuries after the Medici, when aristocrats and intellectuals came to Italy as part of their Grand Tour, they would acquire large numbers of Etruscan relics. This helped “spread the word,” inspiring writers, artists and poets throughout Europe, and not just in Tuscany.

And that explains why, whatever our own origins, this ancient people somehow seems familiar today. It is so close that, thanks to the works of art that have survived, we are able to see its way of interpreting the world, beauty and human nature.

*Elena Percivaldi, historian*

## GAZING TOWARDS MODERNITY

The bronze head of a young male (from the late 4th century BC) at the National Archaeological Museum in Florence.



# THE MYSTERY OF THEIR ORIGINS

There are basically three traditional theories about the origins of the Etruscans; that they were indigenous, that they came from the North and that they came from the East. Today scholars are largely divided into two schools of thought: either they came from the Aegean/Anatolia area or else they were the result of a long process of development

There are many problems when it comes to studying Etruscan civilisation, but one of the most challenging is the question of their origins. This has fascinated historians since ancient times. For the Greek historian Herodotus (“the father of history”), who lived in the fifth century BC, the Etruscans came from the East, while Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who lived in the first century BC, believed they were indigenous. The Roman historian Livy, on the other hand, was convinced that they came from the North.

To these three “historical” theories we can add more recent ones which are based on archaeological and linguistic evidence, as well as on studies of DNA. Yet so far nobody has managed to come up with a definitive answer to the question of their origins, which seems destined to remain unresolved.

### 3 THEORIES, LITTLE EVIDENCE

The first historian to look at the question of the Etruscans was Herodotus, who maintained that they came from Lydia, a

region in what is now Southern Turkey. He believed that they moved to Italy after a terrible famine. According to a legend that was popular among the Celts and other ancient civilisations, a Lydian king (this was during the 13th century BC) was obliged to divide his people in two, ordering one half of the population to leave and seek sustenance elsewhere. The members of the unlucky half proceeded to set sail from Smyrna (modern Izmir) under the guidance of Tyrrhenus. They eventually reached the area of Italy which was then occupied by the Umbrians, and proceeded to found 12 cities. According to this version of events, the Lydians changed their name, first to the Tyrrhenians and then to the Tuscians, a term that is also found in Roman sources. The strength of this thesis lies in the authority and reliability of its author, but also in the similarities between the culture of the Etruscans and that of the Aegean and Anatolia. This is true of their customs, languages, art and religion. Yet it must also be borne in mind that this could also have



been due to the regular commercial and cultural contacts that the Etruscans had with these populations. Nor should we forget that individuals from the Aegean world were present in Etruria and this encouraged the adoption of so-called “orientalising” customs, art and tendencies.

Nor was Herodotus the only writer who believed that the Etruscans came from the East. According to his contemporary, Hellanicus of Lesbos, and Anticlides (who lived not long after them), the first Etruscans were the Pelasgians, a “legendary” people who originated in Northern Greece prior to spreading out over the Mediterranean basin.

Yet another Greek writer, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, believed that the Etruscans were indigenous. He used the work of Etruscan scholars to argue that they had been known as the “Rasna” (or “Rasenna”). Yet linguistic evidence would suggest that this term didn’t refer to the name of a people so much as to ancestry in general: it could best be translated as something

like “I son of” or “I am descended from”.

An even less convincing theory is the one that, in the 18th century, was attributed to the Roman historian Livy, who lived at the start of the Christian era. According to this interpretation of his History of Rome, the Rhaetian people, who lived in the Alpine valleys in what is now Trentino and Alto-Adige, were similar to the Etruscans. The theory is that they moved from the North to the South over the Alps. In actual fact the reverse scenario is just as plausible: namely that the Etruscans spread from the plains to the mountains, colonising the area and introducing the alphabet and other things as they did so.

### ORIGIN OR “DEVELOPMENT”?

Today research into the Etruscans is divided into two main theories: “formation” and Aegean-Anatolian origins. The former was presented by the Etruscologist Massimo Pallottino, who argues that Etruscan civilisation shouldn’t be seen in terms of its “origins” so much as its “formation”. In oth-



er words, as was the case with other ancient civilisations, that of the Etruscans gradually formed with the passage of time in its native area (in this case, ancient Etruria); other elements, so the argument goes, also contributed to this process. These would have included both indigenous (particularly the Villanovian culture) and non-native elements. The latter would have come from the North and the East, and not just Lydia and Anatolia in general, but from the entire Greek or Mediterranean world. According to Pallottino, “archaeological findings would suggest that the Villanovian civilisation was the expression of an Etruscan ethnicity that had not only already been formed, but was even expanding. It can therefore be asserted that this Etruscan ethnicity had developed before the 9th century BC”. In his introduction to his book *Etruscology* (1984), Pallottino goes on to say that “it undoubtedly marked a dramatic change with respect to previous cultures in Etruria and to other Iron Age cultures in central Italy. Its pres-

ence along the Tyrrhenian coast could lead one to believe that this was a new sea-going people, but the phenomenon was largely caused by economic factors”. In other words, the formation of a great people and a great civilisation is completed and enriched by the elements that accompany its development. Therefore, Pallottino concludes, “commercial and intellectual contacts with the East and with Greece, the arrival of immigrants from various social backgrounds, the assimilation of techniques, customs, ideas and words played a vital role in the formation of the Etruscan world.”

Claudio De Palma, on the other hand, has a completely different interpretation. In his book *The Origin of the Etruscans* (2004), which is based on the Lemnos stele (which was found in the village Kaminia on the Aegean island in 1885), he rejects Pallottino’s theory, and repropose the Eastern thesis. De Palma argues that “a nucleus that was endowed with a superior material and spiritual culture reached Italy by sea from

the East, more specifically from the North-eastern and Central Eastern Aegean.”

This is proved by numerous linguistic similarities, in addition to philological research on texts that had been conserved by the Greeks and the Romans. Yet it still needs to be understood why the Etruscans would have moved westwards. The answer, according to De Palma at least, is to be found in the crisis caused by the sudden population explosion in Europe and the aridity of the climate at the end of the third millennium. These were to have dramatic repercussions for the successive millennium, which saw the collapse of numerous civilisations and the start of epoch-making migrations. “Numerous Mediterranean populations were obliged to migrate in order to escape from wars and massacres. Many of them left Anatolia, the Aegean and the Levant.” These included the Tyrrhenians who, once they reached Italy, gave life to Etruscan culture, and were dominant until the advent of Rome.

## RESEARCH INTO THE LANGUAGE

There is an unhelpful lack of conclusive evidence surrounding the origins of the Etruscan language, so the experts have turned to historical linguistics in an attempt to decipher the available clues. As a result they have examined inscriptions with the aim of identifying similarities between the Etruscan language and other, more familiar ancient tongues. Some maintain that during their long voyage from the East the Etruscans stopped in Sardinia, where they founded the Nuragic civilisation before crossing the Tyrrhenian Sea and making landfall in Tuscany. Sardinian, then, would derive from the ancient Lydian language as well as Etruscan.

However, in 2003 Mario Alinei, Emeritus Professor at the University of Utrecht, proposed a revolutionary theory that Etruscan is an archaic form of Hungarian. His research was based on the extraordinary similarity between the titles given to the various ranks of the Etruscan judiciary and their Magyar equivalents, as well as other resemblances that can be identified between the two languages. Of course, research is ongoing, and the experts are far from unanimous in their opinions.

### THEIR MARK ON THE REGION

A breathtaking panorama of Volterra. Nowadays we tend to focus on the development of the Etruscans in the region rather than their origins.





# ARISTOCRATIC PORTRAITS



**A MASTERPIECE OF REALISM**  
A detail from the Urn of the Spouses (c. 90 B.C.), one of the key exhibits at the Guarnacci Museum in Volterra.

The many sculptures and paintings that have survived depict the Etruscans dancing, feasting or celebrating religious rites. It has often been asked if they are naturalistic representations or simply symbolic effigies. Their smile expresses the mystery that still surrounds them

It is never easy to identify the faces of our ancient forebears. We are separated by many centuries and different tastes, but their appearance always seems immortalised in actions or situations in a religious, symbolic and especially funerary context. The Etruscans are no exception. We have inherited many statues, and splendid, colourful frescoes painted on sumptuous tombs. Their elegant profiles observe us from afar, their gaze lost in time, and seem to be trying to communicate enigmatic emotions to those who venture into the narrow corridors of their monumental burial places. They often seem to be young, in their physical prime, disporting themselves in games or combat. Others dance with a flowing, sensual grace, accompanied by the soothing tones of musical instruments. Tawny and bright-eyed, they wear sumptuous garments embellished with precious jewels and necklaces. Women in particular show a fierce pride in their appearance.

## TWO SISTERS, ONE POSE

The two large multi-coloured terracotta sarcophagi of the Seianti sisters are good examples of this - Larthia's belongs to the National Archaeological Museum collection in Florence, while that of her sister Thanunia is in the British Museum in London. These refined works, which date back to a period between the late 3rd and early 2nd century BC, show Larthia in the flower of her youth and Thanunia at a more mature age, a picture of womanly beauty. Both show barely-concealed pride in belonging to the cream of the aristocracy of

Chiusdino. They are wrapped in the opulent folds of their garments, their head encircled by a diadem to which a light veil is attached and their neck richly girdled by heavy gold necklaces. Both have delicate features and strikingly emphasised red hair. Thanunia lies languidly stretched out on one side, richly adorned with precious pendants and studs, her waist clasped by a slender strip knotted at the front. While her right hand lifts her veil to reveal her face, her left holds a finely-engraved mirror. She seems to be lost in contemplation of her reflection and communicates some slight unease through an almost imperceptible curl of her lips. What can she see in the mirror that troubles her?

## FIXED IN TIME OR NATURAL?

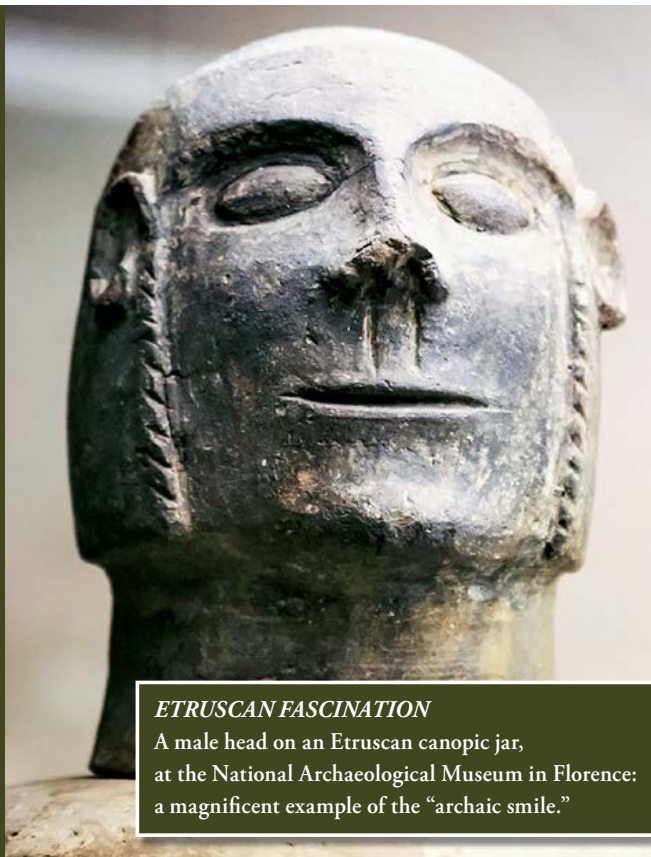
It is hard to say if these portraits are naturalistic or, as seems to be generally accepted, simple idealised effigies with typical classical features, fulfilling the need to present an attractive appearance (in this case, rich, beautiful and haughty) to the subject's descendants rather than showing the person as they were in everyday life.

The self-portraits left by the Etruscans changed a great deal over the centuries, and so their faces changed, too, in the form we can see today. The ancient sculptures display stiff, hard features, with an intensely formal lack of movement. One example is the small bronze of an augur from the island of Fano, near Fossombrone (now in the National Archaeological Museum of Florence). Created in 490 BC, it depicts a priest holding a *lituus*, the typical ritual curved

## THE ENIGMATIC SMILE

Many of the most ancient Etruscan statues display a fixed, enigmatic smile. It has been named "the archaic smile" by academics, who link it with Greek art from the 6th century to 480 BC. It should not be regarded as the expression of an authentic emotion (unlike, for example, the "moti dell'animo" depicted by Leonardo and his followers), but as an absence of feeling.

The smile on such Etruscan statues is not a sign of tranquil happiness but a conventional expression with a purely symbolic role, outside time and space.



### ETRUSCAN FASCINATION

A male head on an Etruscan canopic jar, at the National Archaeological Museum in Florence: a magnificent example of the "archaic smile."

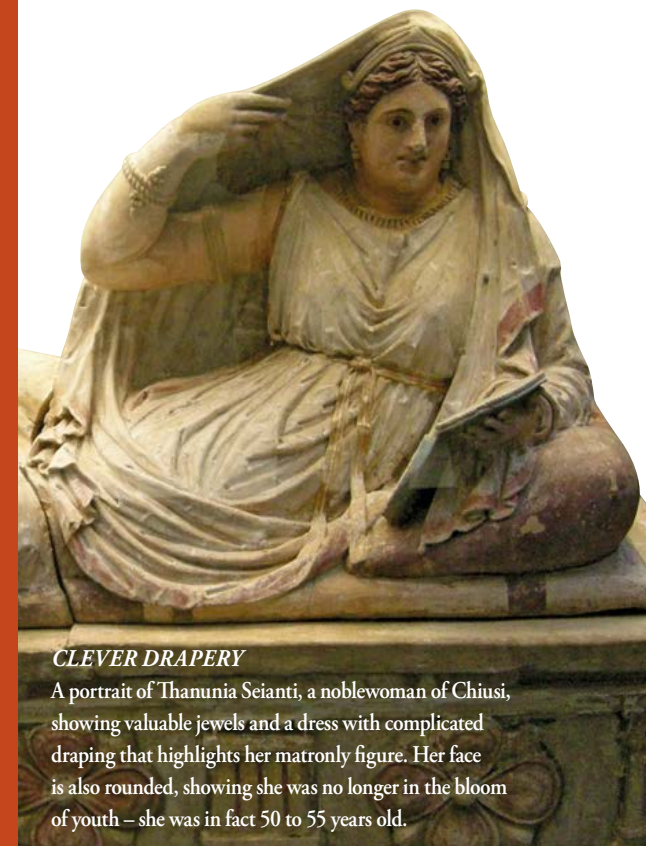
staff he would use when carrying out his duties. His serious, almost stylised face betrays no emotion, unlike the very different head of a young man dating back to around 300 BC - an expressive bronze with an unconventional elegance. Etruscan figurative art has given us some genuine masterpieces, like the enigmatic Apollo di Veio (6th century BC). This life-size depiction (1.80 m tall) is brightly coloured in ochre (the jacket) and black (the hair, gathered into long

braids), with a ruddy skin tone. The god is shown walking in all his youthful arrogance and impetuosity. His archaic smile, though, has long been interpreted as a sign of awareness of the invincibility enjoyed by divine beings. The statue of Uni, the equivalent of Juno, is a very different, more natural work. The goddess is shown with a diadem, earrings and a large necklace with red spheres. Her hair is parted in the middle and her wavy hair is gathered around her head.

## A RATHER "WELL-PADDED" PEOPLE!

Our image of the Etruscans is not only linked to the artefacts they have left behind - it has also been formed by what the Greeks and Romans wrote about them. The Romans especially did not approve of their love for banquets and food, and called them "slaves of their bellies", often making fun of them. The poet Catullus, in a hearty description of the various Italian peoples, mentioned the "fat" Umbrian, the Lanuvino "dark and with strong teeth" and finally the *obesus Etruscus*. Virgil recorded a sacrifice carried out in the presence of a *pinguis Tyrrhenus*, a "fat Etruscan".

These characteristics are clearly visible in the so-called "Obesus" sarcophagus in Chiusi, although it is impossible to know whether the Etruscans really were so well-rounded or if this was just a cliché.



### CLEVER DRAPERY

A portrait of Thanunia Seianti, a noblewoman of Chiusi, showing valuable jewels and a dress with complicated draping that highlights her matronly figure. Her face is also rounded, showing she was no longer in the bloom of youth - she was in fact 50 to 55 years old.

A white tunic drapes delicately over her small breasts, and the *himation*, the sumptuous cloak edged with an opulent red trim, covers her left shoulder. The statue embodies the same aesthetic sensibility we admired in the depictions of the Seianti sisters. And on the subject of funerary art, it is impossible not mention the famous example of the sarcophagus of the Sposi. The couple, lying on a triclinium as they share an orange, display the same enigmatic "archaic smile"

as the Apollo di Veio (which also dates back to 6th century BC). The male figure also has long, braided hair - as, indeed, does his female companion - and elongated eyes. Apart from the beauty and harmony of the pair, what is most striking is the way they are presented - they are serene, happy and content to live in an opulent society whose benefits they have both enjoyed to the full, on an equal footing. Could this be the message they sought to leave for posterity?




**TOGETHER FOREVER**

A couple on the splendid 5th century BC sarcophagus lid on display at the Chianciano Museum.

# ELEGANT, WORLDLY, FEMINIST

*Games, dancing, sumptuous banquets and sexual freedom: the lifestyle of the Etruscan nobility drew harsh criticism from the Romans and Greeks who were horrified by women's active role in society*

**T**he couple recline serenely side-by-side. She is the epitome of grace and trust, he has an arm stretched around her in a gesture of tender protectiveness. The scene is typical of how Etruscans depicted the family in the rich funerary iconography that has survived to the present day. The family lay at the very foundation of society. It was a solid, stable unit with women playing an active role and very much on an equal footing with the men rather than being mere handmaidens, as happened in Greek and Roman society. In one of the most famous funerary masterpieces of the Etruscan era, the Sarcophagus of the Spouses, the wife is depicted reclining on the bier with her husband in an eternal representation of the equality she enjoyed during their life as a couple when she would have reclined beside her spouse on banqueting benches, remaining until the feasting was over. Etruscan women joined in the toasting with the male guests. This was in stark contrast to the ancient Romans who, at the very most, would allow their womenfolk to sit (rather than recline) on the triclinium and even then, never after the slaves had begun



serving wine which was for men only.

Although it would be going too far to say the Etruscans had a matriarchal society (a theory that academics now deem out of date), it has to be said that the high level of female emancipation was one of the unique features of that civilisation and its particular lifestyle, setting it apart from the other great Mediterranean cultures of the pre-Christian era. Viciously criticised by Greek and Roman intellectuals who could not stomach their libertine ways, Etruscan women were sophisticated, elegant and literate. They promoted Hellenising tastes and culture. Wealthier ladies in Etruscan society displayed their power and luxury through their lavish jewellery. In fact, the family money was essentially passed down through the female line using jewellery.

#### WEALTH AND POWER

A pair of gold bracelets featuring filigree and embossed decoration (7th century BC), at the Archaeological Museum in Florence.



#### COMPANIONS, NOT HANDMAIDENS

Etruscan women did not confine their talents to the home and caring for their husbands either. They played an active part in the city state's busy social life and were not shy about expressing their political views in public, ensuring they were also involved in the decision-making processes. Etruscan women were even allowed to become judges, one example being Ramtha, wife of Larth Spitus of Tarquinia.

Husbands treated their wives with great respect too, listening to their opinions before taking any decision. The significance

of women in Etruscan society was also reflected in their legal status which went far beyond that of their contemporaries: no matter how rich or powerful they were, Roman women always remained a Cornelia or a Livia as their name came from their father's lineage. In Etruscan society, on the other hand, women had the right to a first name as well as a family name, just like their menfolk, and in epigraphs, added that of their husband also.

The great emblem of this proactivity was Tanaquil, the shrewd, mysterious wife of Lucius Tarquinius Priscus, the fifth

King of Rome, the first of Etruscan lineage to take the throne. Blessed with prophetic powers, Tanaquil flanked her husband as he rose through to the rank of king, creating Rome's most sophisticated salon for his benefit. On her husband's death, she handled her son-in-law's succession with all the nerve and malice of a seasoned politician. That said, there was also a pragmatic reason for the great respect accorded to aristocratic Etruscan women and the prominent position they enjoyed in society: the Etruscan nobility was small and most males were at war for a good part of the year so if a woman's husband was dead, it was left to her to safeguard both the family unit and its wealth. From sur-

living inscriptions we also know the names that the Etruscans gave to the members of the family: *clan*, for instance, meant son, *sec* meant daughter while *papa* was grandfather, *atinacna* grandmother, brother *thu-va* and grandson *papacs*.

To raise a family and guarantee the survival of the lineage, Etruscans married at a very young age indeed (time was of the essence as life expectancy was around 40) in ceremonies that had both a religious flavour and were quite informal, similar to Roman weddings. Once married, the couple would take over the home which became the domain of the wife (*puia* in Etruscan) whose job it became to do the weaving, keep the fires going and anything else involved in domestic life. The men's roles were very much outside the realm of hearth and home – they were in the army, involved in commerce or were craftsmen. If they belonged to the very small circle of noble families, the newly-weds (*tusurthi*) could look forward to a busy social life filled with society events and enlivened by symposia (drinking parties), banquets, dancing and games.

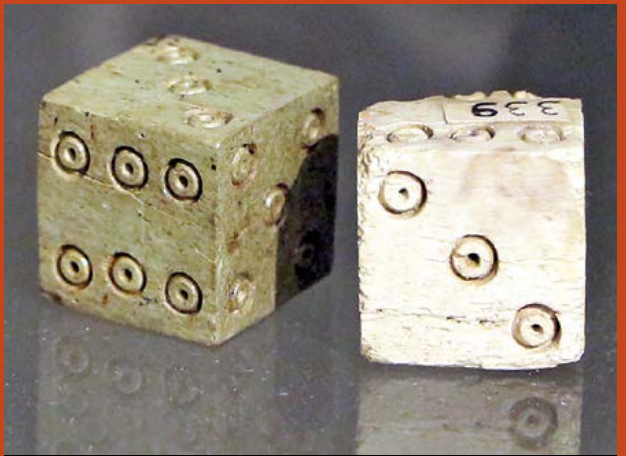
#### LUST AND LUXURY

Their Greek and Latin detractors often accused the Etruscans of living lives of excess, lust, greed and immoderate luxury leading to



## ENTERTAINING PASTIMES

From the 6th to the 3rd centuries BC, *kottabos* was very popular among the Etruscans. The game, probably of Sicilian origin, was played in all the areas under Greek influence, including Etruria. The players had to throw, using precise, elegant movements, the few drops of wine remaining in the goblet and hit a metal disc precariously balanced on a bronze pole. Whoever succeeded, or caused the disc to fall, was rewarded with a piece of fruit or a sweetmeat, or a kiss from the winner's beloved, to whom the attempt had previously been dedicated.



**GAMBLING, A PASSION!**  
A pair of bone dice, c. 350-300 B.C.

Dice games, too, were very popular (one well-known devotee was Lars Tolumnio, king of Veio) as were ball games (episkyros or harpastum). Ivory and bone dice like

the ones above have been discovered in tombs. Another well-loved pastime was a game similar to chess or draughts, also depicted in Greek vase paintings.

a kind of moral decay very far removed from the sobriety of the early centuries. Oftentimes, however, this was pure envy as Etruria Felix must have seemed like a little corner of heaven on earth to its Roman neighbours as it nestled in fertile valleys lush with the finest corn and surrounded by gently-rolling wooded hills teeming with game and topped with row upon row of vines. A land that guaranteed a luxurious existence to the ruling classes who embraced life with gusto and a distinct lack of moderation. Malicious historical gossip aside, archaeological discov-

eries have confirmed that unbridled hedonism was the order of the day, particularly at the height of the civilisation's splendour. The Etruscans had no qualms about semi nudity or full nudity, relished alcohol (ladies included) and accepted public displays of love and sexual promiscuity. Catullus and Virgil both make reference to *obesus etruscus* and *pinguis tyrrhenus*, highlighting the Etruscans' love of pleasure, particularly when it came to the table. Other writers of the day describe the Etruscans sitting down to fabulous banquets twice a day held at tables sumptuously

## SURGEONS AND DENTISTS

The Etruscans had a deep knowledge of human anatomy and were renowned as fine doctors. The Greeks and Latins acknowledged their special skill in making unguents and extracts from plants that cured illnesses and kept the body healthy.

Anatomical studies and an ability to make anaesthetic medications helped surgery develop, as we know from the many surgical instruments discovered. Skulls and jaw bones also bear evidence of the excellent standard of dentistry – the Etruscans were even able to make rudimentary bridges and dentures.



**A GILDED SMILE**  
Copy of an original gold appliance found in an Etruscan tomb.

adorned with the finest of linen and precious porcelain, around which swarmed clusters of slaves, some stunningly beautiful and dressed with unseemly elegance.

But there was more to Etruscan home life than carousing and feasting. Board games were a popular way of entertaining the various family members and, of course, guests, and involved stretching the intellect as much as titillating the palette. One was very similar to chess or draughts: the exact rules have been lost, however, because all that survive are effigies of two very focused

players moving pieces on a board (*tabula lusoria* in Latin). What we do know, however, is that the players were of a very high social status. The end of a banquet might bring a drinking game of *kottabos*, which was probably Sicilian in origin but later spread right through Hellenic culture and the area it covered, Etruria included. Players had to fling the last few drops of the wine in their goblet at a metal disc balanced precariously on a bronze stand. It was a game that demanded both skill and elegance but players that were successful in either hitting the target

or knocking it down altogether, got a piece of fruit, a sweetmeat or a kiss from a person they loved (to whom they would have previously dedicated the throw). Dice-throwing was another popular game and a huge passion of Lars Tolumnius, King of Veii, as were ball games (*episkyros* or *harpastum*). Ivory and bone dice have been discovered in Etruscan tombs also.

We've already seen that there was little time for boredom in Etruscan homes, but a busy social calendar also awaited outside too. The most popular events included chariot and cart races, held in the countryside close to the city or in sacred areas. The races attracted huge crowds of spectators from all ranks of society (women included) who packed into temporary wooden stands of which not a trace remains. That said a wealth of iconography from tomb paintings has survived which provides an insight into the extraordinary popularity of the games with the Etruscan people who watched them with a passion bordering on the fanatical. The Etruscans were also skilled horsemen and bred fast, nimble horses in what is now the Maremma. The winners of the races were bestowed with great honours and presented with valuable prizes in the presence of the leading city authorities.

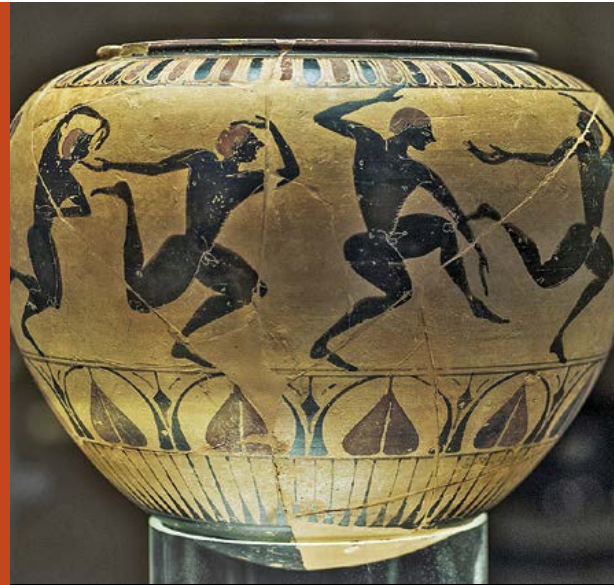
### SPORTY PEOPLE

Another great passion was gladiator games which would either be one-on-one or between opposing teams who would be armed in different ways and were trained in special combat schools. The gladiators themselves were almost always prisoners of war and, much to the delight of the spectators, sometimes fought each other to the death. An-

### SOUNDTRACK

Great lovers of both music and dance, the Etruscans had percussion, wind and string instruments, the most popular being a kind of double flute with two separate pipes. It was known in Greece as the *aulos* and as the *tibiae* in Rome. Credited as an Etruscan invention by all sources was the long bronze or Tyrrhenian trumpet of which there were many different iterations, with different shapes and bends.

While the musical backdrop to Etruscan life was provided mostly by wind instruments, there were also strings such as the lyre, the *kithara*, as well as rattles and drums.



### GRACEFUL DANCE STEPS

The grace displayed by Etruscan dancers stands out on this famous vase (540-520 BC), preserved in the National Archaeological Museum of Florence.

other extremely popular form of spectator sport was watching men and wild animals do battle. Racing and one-on-one gladiator fighting were also part of the feasts organised to mark the death of high-ranking individuals. If family finances permitted, these could continue for an entire week. Many of these elements of Etruscan culture were brought to the Urbe, starting with Tarquin Priscus, the first king from the Etruscan dynasty to rule Rome. It is to the Tarquins that we owe the design of the Circus Maximus where chariot races were held as well as the introduction of the first public games. Also under the influence of the Etruscans, Rome moved away from its custom of funerary games which

evolved into gladiator games. Although they were enthusiastic spectators and fans of racing and fighting, the Etruscans were not shy about getting actively involved either: like the Greeks, they threw themselves into all kinds of athletic sports even though gymnastic games did not have the same importance in the upbringing of young people as in Athens or Sparta. Boxing, wrestling, running, long jump, discus and javelin were the most popular disciplines as evidenced widely in Etruscan art, not least the paintings decorating the walls of certain tombs.

Aristotle was very struck by the fact that boxing matches in Etruria were accompanied by music and equally surprised by the

presence of a flutist during the punishment of a servant or when the cooking was going on. Other literary sources, Latin included, agree with him and confirm the central nature of music in Etruscan society in which almost all the instruments that existed at the time in the Mediterranean area were used. Music accompanied all kinds of areas and times of life: ritual, military, entertainment and even ordinary everyday activities. According to the philosopher Aelianus, even hunting had a musical accompaniment but with surprising results: animals that had been running way eventually fell under the spell of the music and became so compliant they allowed themselves to be captured. Etruscans were equally passionate about dancing which they did as part of rituals and also staged performances to enliven symposia and banquets. The steps and gestures of the male and female dancers can still be seen today in the many surviving paintings and give the impression that the choreography was particularly complex and would have been both spectacular and moving to witness.

While ancient sources clearly state that Etruscan theatrical literature did exist, no related pre-Roman buildings or theatrical spaces survive in present-day Etruria. We do know, however, that there was plenty of theatre and performances with incredibly ancient roots (the earliest involved mime with masked actor-dancers moving to music) that were also an integral part of the aristocratic funerary rites. Varro, a scholar who flourished during the Augustan era, mentions the works of a certain Volnius, who wrote tragedies in the Etruscan language which it is assumed were modelled on contemporary Greece theatre.

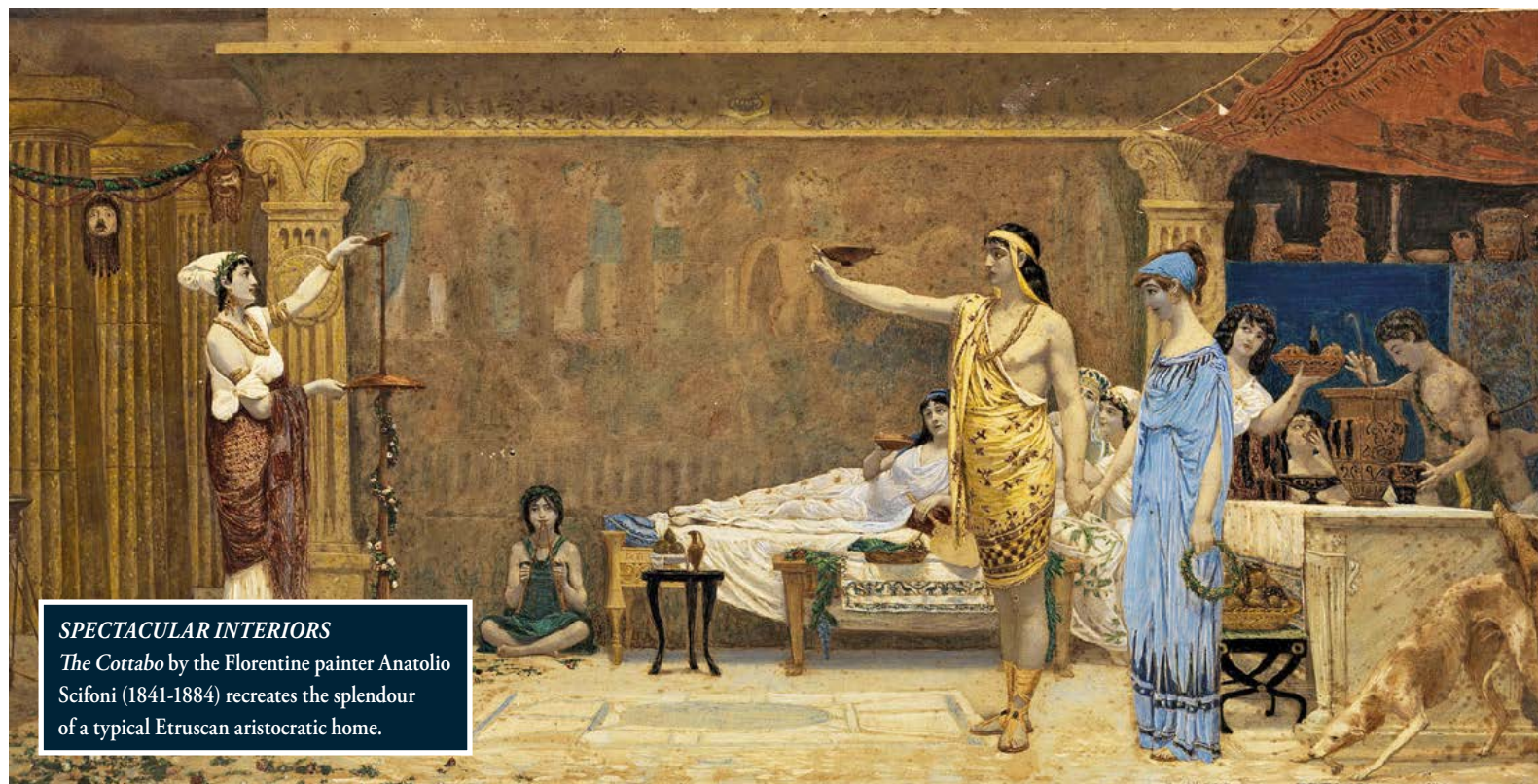


# IN THE ETRUSCAN HOME

*In general, the typical Etruscan city is built on high ground, and is ringed by a robust protective wall. The dwellings may vary according to the period, from simple huts to aristocratic residences, but they always display great attention to detail*

Unfortunately, the list of Etruscan cities whose architectural structure can still be seen is not very long. The additions and changes carried out by the Romans often erased or radically altered their original appearance. However, if we walk through the streets clinging to the hillsides of Volterra or plunge into the solitary beauty of Cortona we can still experience some of the majesty of these ancient Etruscan settlements and the architectural heritage the Etruscan people left behind.

How did Etruscan cities come into being? In simple terms, we can say that it depends which of two periods they were founded in. In the ancient period they developed when several villages coalesced, while in the classical age, from the 6th century BC, the motives behind their growth were more likely to be political. In all cases, the Etruscans evaluated and selected the site of their settlements with great care. It would above all have to be near a river, watercourse, lake or the sea shore, within reach of all the natural resources that could support the economic activities that were most crucial to their prosperity – sailing and trade. The ideal location for a city, then, was a low-lying plain crossed by numerous waterways, favouring exploitation of the extensive agricultural lands, sheltered by the gentle slopes of the surrounding hills. Other centres of habitation, although on the plain, stood on a promontory where they could be more easily defended. Populonia, for example, is protected by a steep cliff and the many hills around it. Building a city at some height also made it possible to spot the approach of enemies from a considerable distance, giving its citizens enough time to ready their defences. The more effectively a city controlled its watercourses and coastline, the stronger and more prosperous it was. As a result not all settlements were equally important, and archaeologists classify Etruscan settlements as “primary” or “secondary”. The primary sites enjoyed a long history, but the others, founded around



## SPECTACULAR INTERIORS

*The Cottabo* by the Florentine painter Anatolio Scifoni (1841-1884) recreates the splendour of a typical Etruscan aristocratic home.



the 6th century BC and abandoned no later than the middle of the 4th century, had a more troubled existence and proved to be less permanent. But notwithstanding their different locations and history, Etruscan cities shared many significant features.

### CITIES AND CEMETERIES

Above all they share a desire for monumentality, which took the form of constructing entire areas created as a setting for the exercise of political power and religious ritual. These spaces were usually sited in the centre of the settlement. As time passed they became associated with the junction of the various main thoroughfares, laid out in a right-angled grid

pattern. As a result the urban space was divided by three main streets running east-west, and cut vertically by another series of axes that divided the city into long, narrow rectangular blocks. The temples, like the acropolis, were located to the west, while the extensive commercial area lay to the east. The division of the city into lots (similar to modern blocks) resulted in efficient, well-ordered management of the urban spaces, a phenomenon later reproduced in Roman cities.

The same layout has been identified in Etruscan cemeteries, many of which were built on a similar plan. The typical necropolis grave sites were divided into lots. The tombs had an opening onto the “street” and the architraves

in the facades were decorated with the name of the tomb’s occupant as if they were in fact houses. All this made the cemeteries easy to negotiate, and reflected the social divisions that existed in the world of the living, perpetuating them in the “city of the dead”.

The tombs provide valuable information about the structure of family dwellings. It should be remembered that the Etruscans regarded their tombs as an eternal dwelling place, so from the most ancient times

they had to provide a faithful reproduction of the house their occupants lived in when alive. We know, for example, that the oldest Etruscan houses, dating back to the Villanovian period (9th-8th century BC) were simple huts built with the help of poles fixed in the ground and topped with a sloping roof.

The outer walls were made using a system of canes and branches, then clad with coarse clay to provide insulation and render them rainproof. They could be oval, elliptical or simply rectangular. Sometimes the interior was divided into several spaces by screens made of laths, and each space had a precise function. It is possible to obtain an idea of how these homes really looked by examining the funerary urn in the “Isidoro Falchi” Archaeological Museum in Vetulonia (Grosseto). We can see

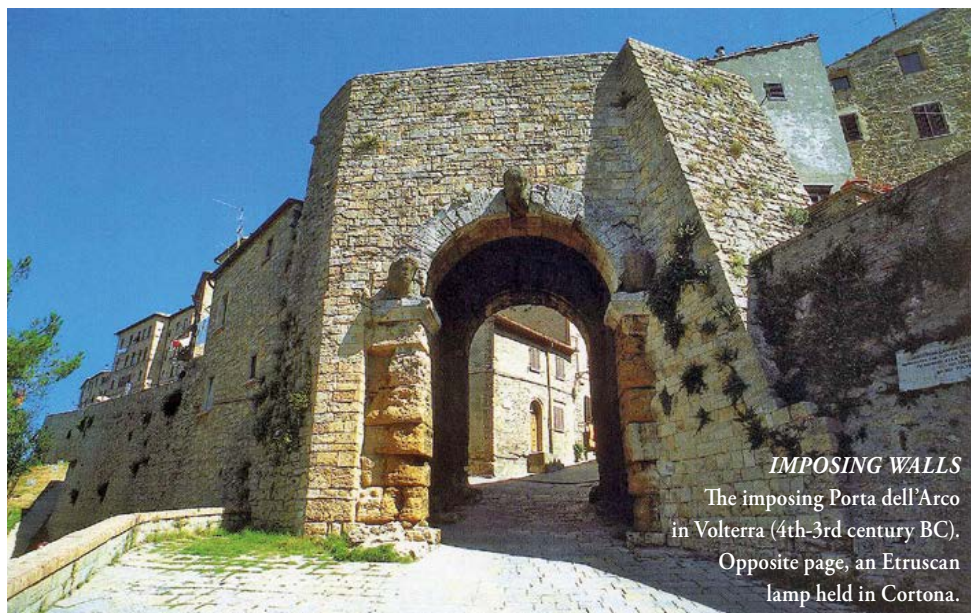
that although the houses of the period were extremely simple, they fulfilled all the requirements of everyday life. An opening in the main wall, vertically in line with the doorway, was created where the ridge poles crossed, allowing smoke from the hearth to escape. The doorway, taking up the whole wall and located on the shortest side, was attached to the walls with hinges and could be secured with an upright pole.

There were no windows, so the only ventilation was provided by the opening in the roof. The interior was almost always in the shade.

In the Villanovian period the houses were constructed with different shapes and materials, depending on location and climate.

In time, though, their appearance became more uniform – the ground plan

became more regular and the rectangular shape became the norm. Construction materials also changed – wood and laths were gradually replaced by dry walls and crude bricks, making the houses more robust and long-lived. The roofs gradually adopted a clear pitched construction and the branches that once covered the beams were replaced by clay tiles. Inside, the division of the interior became more formalised and the first large reception rooms for welcoming guests appeared. A number of small-



**IMPOSING WALLS**

The imposing Porta dell'Arco in Volterra (4th-3rd century BC).

Opposite page, an Etruscan lamp held in Cortona.



er spaces were scattered around the main building, made of wattle and daub in the case of the simpler homes and coarse bricks in the most sophisticated, complex dwellings. The interiors of the ancient houses were rather elaborate – they were accessed along a corridor and were made up of a series of small spaces whose doorways, decorated with mouldings give onto a large rectangular room. A tomb reproducing it is furnished with semi-circular high-back chairs used as pedestals for statues. Soft cushions are carved on the flat couches whose legs display carved decorations, while

fourteen shields hang on the walls.

As domestic dwellings evolved we see the addition of further spaces around a central courtyard with a well to ensure a reliable water supply. During the 4th century BC Etruscan architecture (in common with its artistic taste as a whole) came under Greek influence. The houses, similar to those belonging to Rome's first Republican period, had a central atrium accessed along a corridor. The many small rooms around the atrium fulfilled different functions, serving as bedrooms or work spaces, for example. The most important space was the large room where the elite re-

ceived their friends, as well as their most valued and illustrious guests.

### A SUMPTUOUS VILLA

An example of this is the spectacular villa discovered in Vetulonia (Grosseto) along the via dei Ciclopi (one of the town's main thoroughfares), renamed the 'Domus dei Dolia' because of the large number of olive oil jars that have been unearthed there. This huge building covered an area of almost 400 square metres, and was divided into ten rooms and several service spaces. Its interiors still host Pompeian-style frescoes, bronze statuettes and coins.

This unmistakable evidence of the villa's luxurious nature shows that it belonged to a wealthy, refined family whose fortunes eventually took a turn for the worse. In the 1st century BC, in fact, Vetulonia – like other Etruscan centres – was set alight and destroyed as it had taken the side of the Roman Gaius Marius when embroiled in a civil war with Lucius Cornelius Cilla. When Cilla gained the upper hand, the city was subject to vicious reprisals. A silver coin found in the villa that can be dated to this turbulent period – it was probably lost in the general chaos before the house was burnt down.

## CORTONA, THE WALLED CITY

Perched behind its imposing walls, Cortona dominates the Valdichiana just as it did in ancient times. For centuries the fertile Tuscan countryside that surrounds the city provided prosperity and power for the local princes, allowing them to invest some of their wealth in building monuments. The city acquired a majestic wall in the 4th century BC, studded with architectural jewels like the Porta Bifora (or Ghibellina), which has survived untouched. Although recent investigations have dated it to the 2nd century BC, it bears traces of its Etruscan origins.

The city provides the opportunity to take an evocative underground journey in search of the true Etruscan spirit. A narrow alley leads to the Palazzo Cerulli-Diligenti, where it's possible to admire an intact stretch of the Etruscan walls, six metres long and three metres high, and an elegant semi-circular arch. In via Guelfa, near the Porta di S. Agostino, is an entirely barrel-vaulted underground space made from large blocks of pietra serena sandstone.

The Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca e della città di Cortona (MAEC) in the Palazzo Casali also has a few surprises in store – during the restoration work that made it possible to create the museum, some substantial remains of the city walls, fifteen metres in length, came to light. Experts say that it also served as a buttress, making the foundations of the city's large public buildings safer and more stable.



### QUEEN OF THE VALLEY

A view of Cortona. The entire Valdichiana region can be seen from the walls.

# A PEOPLE IN FASHION

The tomb art and statues that still survive provide many details of Etruscan traditions, customs and, of course, clothing. This type of source, though, does not always highlight the distinction between everyday clothes and those worn for special rituals. It does, however, seem certain that the Etruscans placed great emphasis on their appearance and were passionate followers of fashion, choosing garments whose type and shape often reflected contemporary trends in Greece and the Near East. Although this clothing changed over the centuries the materials remained unchanged – wool or linen, depending on the season. The wool textiles were dyed in bright colours and embellished with embroidered or applied decorative elements, while the linen fabric was worn in its natural light colour.

Increasing contact with the Mediterranean in particular greatly influenced Etruscan fashions, shaping their development. Chiton robes were the fashion towards the end of the 7th century BC. These pleated tunics, fastened at the waist with a belt, were very popular in Greece. Large capes were worn on

top, held in position by *fibula* (brooches) in various shapes, materials and sizes. Older people and women wore heavy wool garments decorated with check and lozenge patterns. Sometimes, though, women preferred lighter apparel in natural shades, far more practical and less



## A TRIUMPH OF COLOURS

Well-to-do Etruscans loved wearing colourful clothes and a great deal of jewellery. The costumes recreated in this illustration from 1882 may be a little too imaginative, but they are still not too distant from authentic Etruscan tastes.

Richly decorated clothing and elaborate hairstyles, clasps, rings and tiaras. The Etruscans devoted a great deal of time and effort to caring for their body and choosing what clothes to wear, with a passionate love of trends arriving from the East

awkward. The typical, exclusively masculine *perizoma* was a loincloth tied at the waist to cover and protect the more intimate parts of the anatomy. It was worn above all by athletes.

Oriental styles had a stronger influence during the period 730-580 BC, and outerwear began to take on different forms. One popular item was the *polos*, a sort of spherical, cylindrical or cubic headscarf or crown, which adorned the heads of statues of gods and priestesses in the Near East and Greece. The Greek influence was also clear in the long tresses ending in a ring that we see reproduced on statues of women from the 7th century BC. The most popular footwear was simple wooden-soled sandals with leather straps.

## NEW ARRIVALS FROM GREECE

The period around the 6th century BC saw an important change in tastes, with the introduction of the linen chiton. This was worn in both long and knee-length versions, with a wide variety of cloaks worn over it. Men preferred the *tebenna*, worn cross-wise and leaving one shoulder bare, while women chose a rectangular cape that cloaked



the body and draped over the front, covering the shoulders. Many were still fond of the classic looks, wrapping themselves in Greek-style cloaks - the generous *himation* or smaller *chlaina*. This was also the time when new types of outerwear made their appearance, like the restyled and typically feminine cone-shaped, Asian-style garment called the *tutulus*. Men often wore a broad-brimmed hat,

the *petaso*, going against the traditional male custom of remaining bare-headed, except when travelling or for other special occasions. As a result the hat became a distinctive accessory for the fashionable Etruscan gentleman. On his feet he would wear shoes or ankle boots with the toe curving upwards (*calcei repandi*), also of Oriental origin. Outerwear garments sometimes had a ritual function

– the *haruspices*, for example, usually wore a cylindrical wool or leather garment while priests and gods donned a distinctive pointed hat.

In the final stages of the Etruscan civilisation fashion, especially for women, experienced an outburst of ostentation and luxury. With head proudly uncovered, the ladies of ancient Tuscia began to display more refined, elaborate hairstyles

recalling their Greek contemporaries, embellishing their hair with extraordinary jewels and tiaras. The sinuous lines of the body were emphasised by clinging chitons, draped over the “strategic” areas through the skilful use of a belt. Men took a more sober approach, abandoning the belt in favour of a straight garment, combined with leather sandals with laces tied below the knee, or heavy boots. After the Roman conquest Etruscan tastes also influenced the new overlords – they were so struck by local fashions that the expression “dressing Etruscan-style” became a synonym for elegance and refinement. This eventually reached such a point that the Romans adopted lace-up boots and the *tebenna* as their own. The sandals became the most popular choice for patricians and the *tebenna* evolved into the distinctive garment of the free Roman - the toga.

## MIRRORS AND RAZORS FOR THE CULT

Recent research has shown that as well as their traditional use as a toilet instrument, wedding gift and a female prerogative limited to the domestic context, mirrors could also have a ritual function. This is suggested by the special nature of the depicted scenes, which refer to the mythological universe, often with Greek roots.

Apart from their everyday purpose, men's razors, too, could also have a ritual, magical function.

### FEMALE VANITY

The sarcophagus depicts the young Larthia Seianti as she proudly shows off her beauty and the opulence of her jewellery. She is wearing bracelets, rings, earrings and a precious necklace. Her appearance bears witness to her love of life, luxury and beautiful things, typical of the Etruscan civilisation.



### BEARDS AND HAIR

And while the Etruscans placed great emphasis on their wardrobe, they also devoted a great deal of effort to body care. Women paid particular attention to cosmetics and hairstyles, especially when they began to appear bare-headed, towards the 5th century BC. The new fashion allowed women to wear elaborate hairstyles – their hair was no longer worn in simple plaits, but allowed to fall in flowing ringlets onto the shoulders or gathered into a crown and fastened with nets and bonnets. Men, who once preferred long, thick, hair, always held in tidy curls, and well-tended beards, only began to shave their beards and cut their



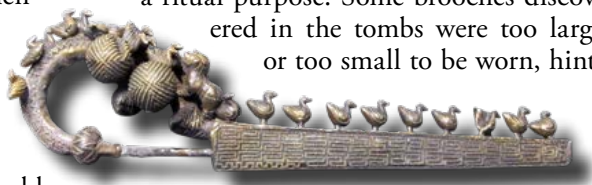
#### COMBS AND CLASPS

Above, a lovely ivory comb decorated with fantastical beasts, from the cemetery of (mid-7th century BC). Below, the Corsini fibula (6th century BC), a masterpiece of Etruscan jewellery-making, held in the Archaeology Museum of Florence. The precious decoration of two lions and a procession of ducks, was made using the refined granulation technique.

be lightened with a concoction based on beech ash mixed with animal fats. Women made up their lips and eyes with vivid colours, using techniques learnt from their Eastern counterparts. This enthusiasm for beauty care can be seen from the cosmetic sets and numerous bronze mirrors, often decorated and accompanied by short inscriptions, that have been recovered from the tombs. Razors, sometimes in cases or pouches, are a common find. The most frequently seen type comprised a blade with handle. The two parts could be fused or worked separately then fastened together with studs. The oldest are rectangular or trapeziform with two edges, but these were eventually superseded by the typical half-moon shape with only one edge.

#### JEWELLERY THAT MAKES A STATEMENT

Garments were decorated and rendered even more opulent by a wide variety of necklaces, starting with the classic brooches, clasps used to fasten cloaks. The men's pieces had a linear look, with a broken, sinuous arc, while the female accessories were more elaborate, and their ostentatious appearance displayed their wearers' wealth and refinement, transforming them into status symbols. In this case, too, they probably also served a ritual purpose. Some brooches discovered in the tombs were too large or too small to be worn, hint-



hair in the 5th century, again influenced by Greek fashion. This evidence of the Etruscan hairstyling cult can still be seen in the splendid bone and ivory combs decorated with animal motifs.

The Etruscans also boasted some especially refined cosmetics. Women loved enhancing their appearance with creams, ointments and perfumes, often imported from the East. Cosmetic oils were made using herbs like rosemary and sage, and hair could

#### A STRANGE COWBOY HAT

Iconographic sources, especially the famous statue of the Cappellone di Murlo (at Poggio Civitate, Siena), demonstrate the use of some bizarre headwear, whose shape is reminiscent of the Mexican sombrero or the cowboy Stetson, with a wide turned-up brim and a tall, conical crown.

The origin and use of this type of hat are not clear. Some theorise that they were worn, at least in the case of the Murlo example, by eminent individuals, perhaps to emphasise their power and eminence, while other experts believe the enigmatic figure could be a healer.



#### A BIZARRE FIGURE

Discovered at Poggio Civitate, the statue is held in the Archaeology Museum of Murlo (Siena).

ing at a purely symbolic function – they were, in fact, intended only for funerary use. We know the fibula was an essential element in the costume of the haruspices, respecting an archaic traditional usage as protective talismans. These individuals could perform their role only when dressed in the “old style”, fastening their clothing with fibulas, with no laces or other modern elements.

Alongside these brooches, the Etruscans loved to display a wide variety of tiaras, bracelets, rings and earrings in

bronze, silver, gold and electrum, an alloy of gold and silver. This jewellery was an artistic peak of the Etruscan civilisation and some amazing techniques were used in its manufacture. The Etruscans learnt the granulation method from Eastern artisans (and later perfected it). This enabled the elements to be soldered together, with a base sheet and almost microscopic gold spheres, giving rise to extraordinary masterpieces. How they managed to achieve such a result is still a subject of research for passionate experts.



# FIRST-RATE COOKS, GOURMAND GUESTS

*Wheat, vines and olives were the treasures of Etruria. While the Etruscan diet was based mainly on soups and gruels, meat and game were served at the sumptuous banquets of the aristocracy*

**C**ereals, wine and oil made up the trio of foodstuffs upon which the Etruscans built their gastronomic and commercial fortunes. On many occasions, usually coinciding with wars and famines, even Rome had to rely on the “Etruscan granary” that produced a surplus destined for export. Such agricultural production was made possible by the use of effective tools, the mineral rich subsoil providing the resources from which they were able to forge all types of implement.

The Etruscans’ systematic exploitation of the land and their specialization in cereal farming moulded the landscape into its characteristic form made up of neighbour-



## GOOD FOOD AND PRECIOUS GIFTS

For the Etruscans, food was not just a question of eating well – it had a profound ritual value, as shown by this bronze statuette in the National Archaeology Museum in Florence, which depicts a woman making an offering to the gods.

ing regular-shaped plots that remained unaltered for over two millennia until the dawn of modern mechanisation. These fields were the source of the copious stores of cereals described by Livy and consisted mainly of wheat and farro with which to make bread, focaccias and polenta-like gruels (*puls* in Latin). The bakers of Chiusi, Pisa and Arezzo baked prized bread from common wheat, while the farro, which was easy to cultivate, was ground before being turned into porridges and gruels. Furthermore, the cultivation of chickpeas, lentils and fava beans enabled the Etruscan farmers (and, more generally, the Italic peoples of that period) to mix the cereal flours with those made from the legumes.

## AMPHORAE TO EXPORT

Wine arrived on Etruscan tables towards the end of the 7th century BC, when the limited supply of imported wine from Greece coincided with increased local production promoted by the aristocratic classes that had been influenced by the Hellenic ritual of the Symposium, at which the nectar of Bacchus was the essential component. Analysis of the development of the workshops for making *buccheri* (Etruscan ceramic wine jugs in imitation of the Greek versions), has attested to the rapid spread of vine cultivation in Etruria, which was soon producing such quantities of wine as to be able to export the surplus. The discovery of amphorae in the Mediterranean basin has enabled the reconstruction of the trading routes: to the south, wine was traded along the Tyrrhenian coast all the way to Sicily, while to the north it followed the coast reaching Celtic France and even Spain. Like almost all food and drink from ancient

times, Etruscan wine was very different from its modern version. Dense, strongly aromatic and with a high alcohol content, today it might not be so well appreciated. Generally, the initial grape must obtained from the harvest was consumed immediately, while the remainder was left to rest in containers made of terracotta, the sides of which were smeared with resin or tar; the liquid was allowed to ferment for around six months and then in the spring, it was filtered and transferred to amphorae for transportation. Once served, the wine was not drunk neat but mixed with water and honey.

The high quality of the Etruscan wine meant that it was particularly appreciated and even exported to Greece, where the history of the drink had begun. Numerous Greek and Latin sources agree about the high quality of Etruscan grapes and vines, and the definitive “certification” came from Livy and his story of Arunte of Chiusi. Arunte, a cuckolded husband unable personally to take revenge on his rival, an influential local man, urged the Celts to invade the town, tempting them with an abundant supply of the excellent local wine. This episode, albeit the source of numerous doubts, predates the sacking of Rome by Brennus in 390 BC, a historic event that is well acknowledged. As part of the deal agreed with the barbarians, the jealous Arunte is said to have included a quantity of the local olive oil.

#### TARQUIN THE ELDER'S OIL

This anecdote introduces the third cornerstone of Etruscan agriculture: the olive. The cultivation of olives was the protagonist of a similar, if not directly parallel, trajectory to that of the vines. Until the end

#### COOK'S TOOLS

Etruscan homes did not have a special room for preparing and cooking food, so these activities often took place outdoors – only the homes of the rich had a proper kitchen. The food was prepared on stoves of various shapes and sizes, with a pierced hot plate for the pans and a low opening for adding fuel to the fire within.

Bronze or iron meat skewers up to a metre long were the most commonly used utensils, along with multi-pronged flesh hooks used to remove meat from a cauldron or the stove top. Cooks also had roast pans, and a grater, surprisingly similar to those we use today.



#### KITCHEN UTENSILS

This set of kitchen utensils is now preserved, alongside many other objects, at the Chiusi Museum.

1. Containers for liquids
2. Bronze grater
3. Metal pan
4. Meat skewer

of the 3rd century BC, olive oil was imported from Greece and only at the end of the century did the first local cultivations appear. According to tradition it was Tarquin the Elder – an Etruscan with a Greek father and a future King of Rome – who introduced the cultivation of the plant. This would indicate that the technical rudiments necessary for planting the first olive groves arrived from the colonies of Magna Graecia, where the plant was already widespread and with whose inhabitants the Etruscans enjoyed trading relationships.

Bread, oil and wine, especially if they are of the highest quality, are a fine starting point from which to prepare a lunch. However, Etruscan cuisine involved much more than this winning trio and their meals were enriched with produce from the land. Vegetables and legumes, onions, garlic, carrots, peas, chickpeas, lupin beans and cabbage were part of the daily diet, especially that of the common classes, together with the extremely widespread fava beans. The latter were particularly appreciated for their versatility as they could be prepared raw, or boiled

with water, milk and wheat in the case of simple gruels, but also dried and conserved. The fava beans were sown in alternation with wheat because the fava were able to restore the soils' nitrogen oxide levels that the cultivation of cereals tended to consume.

The systematic and intensive development of arable farming was certainly not to the detriment of livestock agriculture, however. Animal products were by no means absent from Etruscan dining tables; the most widely consumed meat was pork (raised in particular in the Po valley), as well as the meat





### THE ART OF EATING IN COMPANY

The Etruscans adapted the oriental custom of eating lying down, in special dining rooms. The food was served (along with wine) on trays and placed on small tables, in front of the guests. This convivial habit was then passed onto the Romans (on the opposite page, the reconstruction of a *triclinium*). Left, an Etruscan chalice (*kantharos*) from the Tomb of the Duce at Poggio al Bello (Vetulonia, c. 550-525 B.C.).



of goats and sheep. A particular recognition was acknowledged to cows, which were afforded a kind of sacred protection linked to the fundamental role of these animals in agricultural work: their meat was consumed only on rare occasions when not for ritual celebrations. A similar respect was extended to horses, for which the Etruscans, a warrior people of able horsemen, preferred for military or sporting activities, like chariot races.

Some Etruscan delicacies, which have been documented, include roosters and hens but also small mammals such as voles, hedgehogs, porcupines, dormice, as well as crows, doves, ducks and other birds, which were captured in nets hung between trees. Completing the diet were farmyard animals and, above all, game,

which was a source of protein for the poor. Woods and heaths were the ideal habitats for wild boar, roe deer and hares. In the inland lagoons fisherman would catch eels, and along the Tyrrhenian coast they would fish for tuna, swordfish, sea bream and mullet. Molluscs too were enjoyed by the Etruscans.

WINE PREPARES THE HEART FOR LOVE AND MAKES  
US APT FOR PASSION: WHERE THERE IS WINE  
IN ABUNDANCE, SORROW AND WORRY TAKE WING.

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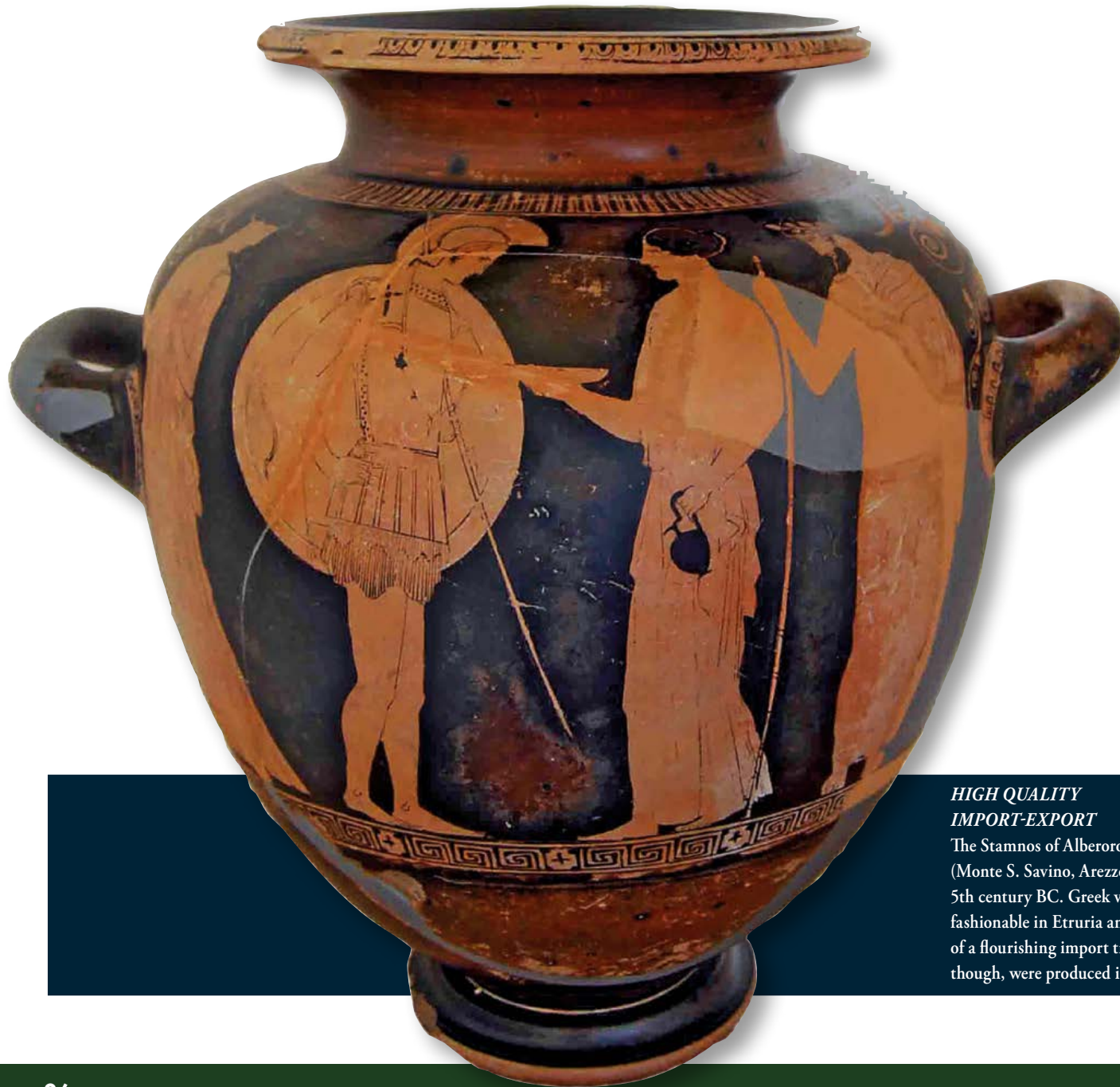
The habits of the lower classes were undoubtedly more frugal and their daily diet was based largely on cereals and legumes. Wheat, grain, farro, barley and foxtail millet were transformed into focaccias or dense gruels like vegetable soups and similar to the Romans' *puls*, rich in vitamins and fibre and simmered in earthenware pots as has been widely demonstrated by numerous archaeological discoveries. Popular cuisine was based on

garlic and onion, which were considered to have curative and aphrodisiac powers. While servants ate an excessive amount of onions, even consuming them raw, the wealthy showed greater restraint and preferred them in their cooked form. Also common were leeks, which were appreciated for their delicate flavour. To season meats, in particular game, the Etruscans used bay leaves; in fact, the laurel tree grew spontaneously and in such numbers as to form laurel woodlands.

### A ROYAL BANQUET

At the homes of the rich, the greater economic resources were combined with a refinement in matching flavours and an obsessive attention to service, with plates of differing shapes and colours and braziers created to keep food hot. The banquets of the Greeks and Etruscan nobles revolved around wine (a costly ingredient which in itself was enough to afford the host and his

guests particular social status) and the copious presence of meat, boiled in enormous bronze cauldrons supported on tripods or roasted on spits. The painting on one of the Golini tombs offers a magnificent example of the Etruscan larder before a banquet: there was a whole cow, a roe deer, a hare and various birds. The menu for a sumptuous feast would begin with eggs, then move on to roasted meat, birds, stuffed porchetta, fish and molluscs, to conclude there would be a selection of deserts and cakes made from cheese, honey and eggs. While the servants cooked for their masters, the guests consumed the infinite dishes while languidly reclining on triclinium beds alongside the womenfolk, who were dressed in all their finery. The dining space was illuminated by the light of candles held in bronze candelabras, while diligent semi-naked servants waited upon the guests and lyre and flute players accompanied the feast.



# ETRUSCAN EXCELLENCE BROUGHT COMMERCIAL DOMINANCE

*Not just wheat, olive oil and wine. Skilled artisans and enterprising merchants, the Etruscans dominated the Mediterranean through the superb workmanship of their metal objects and the refined taste of their ceramics*

## **HIGH QUALITY IMPORT-EXPORT**

The Stamnos of Alberoro krater (Monte S. Savino, Arezzo) from the late 5th century BC. Greek vases were very fashionable in Etruria and were the subject of a flourishing import trade. Other vases, though, were produced in central Italy.

**A** fertile granary on the surface and an inexhaustible source of raw materials below ground, the land around their settlements was a springboard for Etruscan development, nurtured by the availability of natural resources, eventually reaching its peak in the period of greatest splendour. A generous reserve of cereals and wood, olive oil, wine, iron, copper and tin created wealth within its



borders, then generated a surplus of quality goods that promoted commerce and imposed Etruscan style throughout the markets of the Mediterranean.

While the farmers cultivated the most remunerative crops, exploiting the region's mineral wealth enabled metal workers to forge increasingly advanced agricultural implements. This virtuous circle saw yields increase dramatically, encouraging trade and exchange with other peoples. Once the trade routes had been established, Etruscan merchants did not restrict themselves to selling the fruits of nature, they also offered finely decorated amphorae and pottery, furnishings, brooches, armour and masterpieces of the goldsmith's art, creating a distinctive manufacturing style

that was a symbol throughout the Mediterranean of luxury and refinement.

The Etruscan iron-making and metallurgical industries have left abundant proof of intense activity – in some areas millions of tons of slag left over from metal production formed new hills. Populonia, for example, now part of the town of Piombino, was the region's most important metal working centre in the Bronze Age and throughout antiquity, later to be joined by present-day Volterra.

#### WEAPONS, ARMOUR, PLOUGHS

Mineral resources were mostly concentrated in north-west Etruria – the island of Elba, with its haematite reserves, Campigliese with copper and tin, the Colline

Metallifere, rich in pyrites, copper, lead, alum and silver-bearing galena. In Populonia and Vetulonia (now districts of Castiglione della Pescaia), after the minerals had been extracted they immediately underwent an initial treatment in the furnace to allow the metals to “settle”, but in general the work of processing the extracted materials involved many other centres, each specialised in a different type of product, for military or civil use. Perugia worked mostly with bronze and wrought iron, while Vulci and Arezzo excelled in making weapons, also forging them in precious metals. To separate the slag from the metal the metals were heated in wood and coal burning furnaces creating temperatures of 1,250°C. Temperatures above or below this

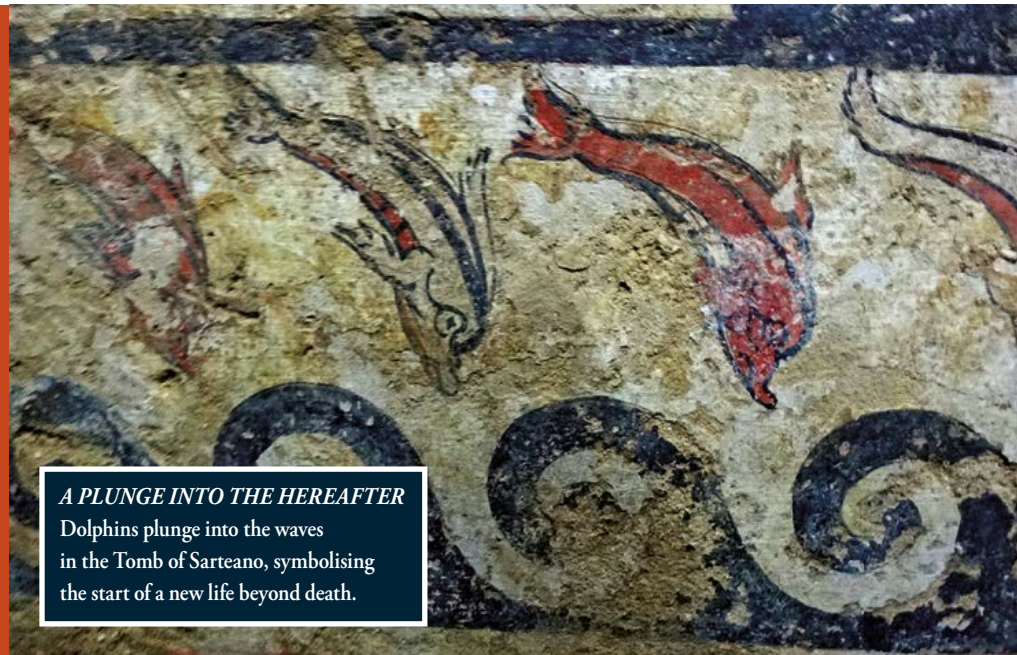
could not guarantee the same results, so the metal-working industry required a highly-specialised workforce. The Greek writer Diodoro Siculo left an admirable account of these complex activities. In the 1st century BC he observed the iron-making process on the island of Elba, as well as the transformation of minerals into weapons, hoes, scythes and ploughs. “The workers broke up the stones and burnt the pieces in skilfully-constructed furnaces. They melted the rock in the intense fire inside the furnaces, then sorted the stone according to the size of the lumps and created pieces similar to a large sponge. Some people would buy this material and employ a large number of blacksmiths to work and transform it into a wide variety of iron instruments”.

If, as we have seen, copper was easy to find throughout the region, tin had to be imported. Etruscan artisans worked bronze using a repousse technique to decorate domestic objects or a lost wax process for weapons, tools and art objects. Many examples of these skilfully created objects have survived, including two wonderful masterpieces – the Chimera of Arezzo and the statue of the Orator, both in the Archaeological Museum of Florence. One special aspect of Etruscan bronze work was the production of mirrors, an activity that began in the second half of the 6th century BC. Unlike Greek and Roman mirrors, which had a flat surface, Etruscan mirrors had a convex surface – this produced a smaller but much sharper image. The disc was forged in a single piece (with or without a handle) and the back was engraved, or a repousse sheet, preferably bearing mythological scenes, was soldered onto it.

## THE LUCKY DOLPHIN

Expert sailors, in ancient times the Etruscans were known as ruthless pirates. This partly well-deserved reputation (the line between privateers and pirates has always been difficult to draw), and was attributed to them by the Greeks, one of their most powerful rivals for maritime dominance.

“Presently there came swiftly over the wine-dark sea / Tuscan pirates on a well-benched ship / a miserable doom led them on”. These lines are from Homer's Hymn to Dionysus, which goes on to describe how the Tyrrhenian pirates attempted to capture the god, so were transformed into dolphins. Since that time these creatures became sacred to the Etruscan sailors, who regarded it as a good omen when they saw dolphins leaping out of the water as they rode the ship's bow wave. In a number of tomb paintings the dolphin symbolises the deceased's nautical adventures.



#### A PLUNGE INTO THE HEREAFTER

Dolphins plunge into the waves in the Tomb of Sarteano, symbolising the start of a new life beyond death.

### THE ELEGANCE OF BLACK

Etruscan pottery was also a stunning testament to the skills of local craftsmen, and the pieces that survived until today are clear evidence of this civilisation's commitment to excellence. Originally made in the home to fulfil the need for domestic kitchen implements, such pieces were later produced by craft workshops. They had already reached high levels of quality by the 7th century BC, when Caere (modern-day Cerveteri) was one of the most famous manufacturing centres. As trade developed the demand for containers for olive oil and wine also grew, and workshops sprang up in Veio, Tarquinia and Vulci. The industry experienced a decisive expansion in the late 8th century BC when the first decorated ceramic objects, intended for aristocratic villas or as funerary items, made their appearance. Founded by artisans from Greece, these workshops attracted Etruscan apprentices, creating local schools. Some of the most sought-after products were vases imitating the pottery of Corinth and Athens, featuring first black then red figures.

One style produced exclusively by Etruscan artisans was the burnished black *bucchero* ware. The first examples may have appeared in Cerveteri, and were originally intended to imitate metal banqueting ware. Shaped and dried in the air, the *bucchero* pieces developed a deep, lustrous shiny black colour after being fired in special kilns with an oxygen-free atmosphere, where the ferric oxide in the clay was transformed into ferrous oxide, producing the typical colouration.

The manifold types, shapes and colours



#### BRONZE MASTERPIECES

The Chimera of Arezzo (now in Florence), the work of a team of artisans from Arezzo, is a perfect synthesis of the Greek style and Etruscan techniques.

of Etruscan pottery were dictated not only by when it was produced but also by the region it was made in and even the individual factory, which could have developed its own distinctive and totally original technique. Plates and tableware, votive vases, *oinochoe* amphorae (similar to pitchers), kraters, goblets and strainers are just some of the items found in the necropolis. They have enabled modern researchers to investigate Etruscan manufacturing techniques and develop a better understanding of how Etruscan society evolved.

### FROM THE NILE TO GAUL

A wealth of mineral assets, flourishing agriculture and artisanal skills led Etruria to carve out a place in the Mediterranean's thriving trade network. Skilled, sometimes rather unscrupulous, sailors (the Greek word *Thyrrenoi*, Tirreni, was used to describe the Etruscans, but was also another word for "pirates") and their ships travelled as far north as Liguria and southern France, while to the south they hugged the coast of Campania to reach the Aeolian islands

and the Greek colonies of eastern Sicily. Archaeological remains bear witness to intense commercial traffic with mineral-rich Sardinia. Finally, Etruscan merchants frequented the North African coast, visiting Carthage and the busy entrepot of Naucratis, and following the trade routes of the Greeks they journeyed as far as Asia Minor.

The development of such widespread commercial activity brought a need for port facilities along the Tyrrhenian Sea coast, which, apart from Talamone and Populonia, offered no natural harbours. The 6th century BC saw the establishment of important ports and mercantile markets in Gravisca (port of Tarquinia) and Pyrgi (port of Cerveteri), while the island of Elba was a hub for the sea routes to Corsica and Sardinia.

Trade routes also left the commercial centres along the Etrurian coast towards the interior of mainland Italy, generally following the paths carved out by river valleys. Etruscan goods could sail up the Tiber, then navigable, to the Latini, Sabini and Umbri. Further north some centres like Marzabotto and Gonfienti grew up as outposts of colonial expansion, driven by the need to find more land for cultivation but also to maintain control of the inland trade routes leading to Emilia-Romagna and from there to central Europe. Etruscan cereals and Greek goods unloaded in Adriatic ports like Adria, Spina, Ancona and Numana crossed the Apennines and the Po Valley. Following the same routes, the Etruscans forged links (not necessarily friendly) with the Celtic peoples, retracing ancient paths along which travelled precious goods like gold and amber.



# THE "ENIGMA" OF WRITING

Etruscan is a perfectly readable language: indeed its alphabet is derived from Greek. But even if its sounds are known to us, the meaning of many words remains a mystery

The language that the Etruscans spoke and used for written communication is one of the most fascinating enigmas of their civilisation. Over the centuries many philologists have tried to understand its secrets, but they haven't always succeeded. There are many reasons for this uncertainty. First and foremost, Etruscan appears to have been genealogically isolated from other linguistic families and so, when it died out, it left no "heirs". Even if a large number of inscriptions has survived, we are unable to refer to words in other languages, something that would be extremely useful in trying to decipher their meaning. Nor are we helped by the silence of surviving Roman sources in this respect, as they have little to say on the subject of Etruscan literature. But the basic problem is that most of the inscriptions refer to funerals and other rituals,

## THE FALSE MYTH OF THE ASPIRATE 'C'

In parts of Tuscany (particularly between Florence and Siena) there is a phenomenon known as the

Tuscan *gorgia* (or throat). It is an aspirate "c", which sounds like the letter "h". For many years it was believed that this was a throwback to the Etruscan language. In actual fact it

is far more recent. There is no record of this prior to the 16th century and it is entirely absent in certain places, such as Corsica, which had been colonised by the Tuscans in the past.

*T A B I e l l a Nov. Act. Erud. A. 1739. Mens. Jan. pag. 3.*  
*Etruscae Litterae. Alphabetum Etruscum. Latinae Litterae.*

I.	A.	Α . Α . Α . Ϸ . Ϸ . Α . Α . Α . Α .	A .
II.	Ξ.	Ξ . Ξ . Ξ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ .	E .
III.	Ϸ.	Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ .	H .
III.	⊙.	⊙ . ⊙ . Ϸ . Ϸ . ⊙ . ⊙ . ⊙ .	TH . T .
V.	Ι.	Ι . Ι . Ι .	I .
VI.	Κ.	Κ . Κ . Κ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Κ . < .	K .
VII.	√.	√ . √ . √ . √ . √ . √ . √ . √ . √ . √ .	L .
VIII.	Μ.	Μ . Μ . Μ . Μ . Μ . Μ . Μ .	M .
VIII.	И.	И . И . И . И . И . И .	N .
X.	Γ.	Γ . Γ . Γ . Γ . Γ . Γ . Γ .	P .
XI.	Ϸ. Δ.	Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ .	R .
XII.	Ζ.	Ζ . Ζ . Ζ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ .	S .
XIII.	Ϸ.	Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ .	T .
XIII.	√. γ.	√ . √ . √ . √ . γ .	V .
XV.	⊙.	⊙ . ⊙ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ . Ϸ .	PH . F .

rather than to everyday life, which would be more useful for understanding who the Etruscans really were. For this reason, in many cases we can only get a very rough idea of the writings and their context without being able to obtain a complete and precise translation.

## NUMEROUS INSCRIPTIONS

As previously stated, there is a vast quantity of material: a total of more than 10,000 inscriptions. The longest is the *Liber Linteus*, a piece of linen cloth used for wrapping the mummified corpse of an Egyptian woman in the late Ptolemaic era. It is subdivided into 12 rectangular frames and contains a ritual calendar, with a total of 1,200 words. It isn't known how it reached Egypt, although it was probably taken over by an Etruscan merchant. It was discovered in the 19th century by a Croatian collector, who acquired it and took it to Zagreb, where it remains to this day. The second longest surviving text is the so-called Capua Tile, an inscription on a large terracotta tile which contains about 300 words. This is also thought to be a calendar ritual. The third longest surviving text is the Cortona Tablet, which was found in 1992: it contains a document which



refers to the sale of some pieces of land.

The other important texts for understanding the Etruscan language are the Pyrgi Tablets or Foils. They date back to 509-508 BC and were found near the city of the same name, which lies to the north of Rome. They are of great interest not only because they feature the dedication of the temple to the Goddess Uni by the governor of the city of Caere, but also (and above all) because they contain the translation of a text in the Punic language, which can be deciphered. Mention should also be made of the Cippus of Perugia, a boundary stone that has a long inscription (on both sides) of some 136 words.

### THE GREEK MODEL

Thanks to the study of this evidence, it seems clear that Etruscan wasn't an Indo-European language, even if it shares features with some of the languages in this group, such as ancient Greek and Luwian (a language spoken in Anatolia in ancient times). Other elements are similar to those found in Semitic languages. Etruscan is, in itself, perfectly readable: in actual fact the Etruscans had a writing system which derived from ancient Greek, which was in use in the colony on Ischia, not far from Cuma. It was read from right to left. In the older inscriptions there is no punctuation. This was introduced in the Sixth Century BC, along with spacing between words. Etruscan and ancient Greek had the same number of vowels (four) and shared some consonants, such as the letter H, as in Hercules. The



**A CONTRACT IN BRONZE**

The reassembled front sheet of the Cortona Tablet.

The missing piece was never found.

### THE CORTONA TABLET, AN AMAZING DISCOVERY

In 1999 it was announced that a bronze tablet measuring 50 cm by 30 cm had been discovered in Cortona, a small town in the province of Arezzo in Tuscany. It consisted of eight fragments, seven of which were found, while an eighth was lost. The inscription, which dates back to the Second Century BC, contains the third longest text in the Etruscan language to have been found so far. It is only shorter than the linen cloth wrapping used for a mummy (which is now housed in a museum in Zagreb) and the Capua Tile.

This extraordinary find had in fact been made in 1992 by a carpenter (who was from another region of Italy, Calabria) in the dump of a building site in Piagge di Camucia, in the Arezzo area. After seven long years of research, the content of the 206 words (spread over 32 lines) was established: the buying and selling of some land involving one Petru Scevas of the Cusu family and 15 other people. The text in itself does not refer to a particularly important event, but its discovery enabled scholars to reconstruct a series of words that were unknown until then, such as the numbers *zal* (2), *sa* (4) and *sar* (10), and to provide other precious information about the "mysterious" Etruscan language.

Greek name is Herakles, while in Etruscan it is Hercl. And often it is the abundance of names and their recurrence in inscriptions which enable scholars to decipher the language. Onomastics has also led to an important consideration: it would appear that the Etruscans (unlike speakers of Greek and Latin) didn't distinguish between male and female genders, at least in their grammatical syntax. Little is known about their verbs. It is, however, curious to observe that, even if the Etruscan language completely disappeared not long after the end of Etruscan civilisation (the Latin author

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THE ETRUSCAN LANGUAGE WAS TAUGHT IN ROME DURING THE PERIOD OF THE REPUBLIC, JUST AS GREEK WAS TAUGHT DURING THE IMPERIAL AGE.

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OTTAVIO MAZZONI TOSELLI

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Aulus Gellius reckoned that it was still spoken in parts of Tuscany in the Second Century AD), its alphabet continued to influence other writing systems in both Italy and Europe: Rhaetian (which was spoken in the Western Alpine valleys until the Roman conquest), Venetic (in what is now the Veneto region), Camunic (in use in the Val Camonica, in what is now the province of Brescia), and Lepontic (which featured in Gola-secca culture and was spoken in what is now Swiss Italy, Western Lombardy and Eastern Piedmont). And because of the latter, Etruscan also influenced the rhunes, which were used in Northern Europe until medieval times.



# RELIGION ABOVE ALL

The Etruscans were superstitious and experienced religion as a complex daily practice. The rituals, which were described in minute detail in sacred books, were performed with obsessive attention to detail. Otherwise there was a serious risk of incurring the wrath of the gods...

## A THREE-HEADED MONSTER

The three-headed serpent in the Tomb of the Infernal Chariot at Sarteano (Siena). It would strike fear into the deceased on the journey to the afterlife.

“They were a people who, more than any other, were devoted to religious ceremonies because they excelled in the art of practising them.”

That is how Livy described the extraordinary *pietas* of the Etruscans, recognising their ability to consider religion as an integral and essential part of daily life.

The Etruscans believed that the individual was in total submission to the will of the gods, something that he or she could only hope to understand and endure. It was the gods who established the destiny of both men and states, and thus fate had to be studied and foreseen in advance, by identifying and interpreting the signs that the gods occasionally deigned to give. The chances of being able to interfere with divine will were decidedly limited, and depended on the fulfillment of acts and rituals that might please the gods. It was therefore necessary to observe rigid rules of behaviour so as not to cause offence.

## TEMPLES AND GODS

Complex ceremonies were at the basis of every event, from the simplest to the most extraordinary, starting with the foundation of cities. The location was chosen with the utmost care. Initially the priests would use a curved stick known as the *lituus* to mark out the *templum*, i.e. the part of the sky that was considered sacred. Two axes – North-South and East-West – divided the celestial vault into four quadrants, which were subsequently subdivided. Each area was the seat of a particular deity and anything that happened there had significance for the city. The celestial *templum* reflected





THE DIVINE TRINITY

**TINIA**

Tinia or Tin (also, according to some sources, Tunia) is the most important Etruscan divinity. The husband of Uni, he is the equivalent of the Greek Zeus and Roman Jupiter. It may also be possible to identify him with Voltumna, god of the Etruscan Federation.

**UNI**

Uni was the highest goddess in the Etruscan pantheon, and patron of Perugia. She and Tinia were the parents of Heracle. Her Greek equivalent was Hera, while the Romans assimilated her as the goddess Juno.

**MENRVA**

Menrva (or Menerva) was born from the head of Tinia. She was the goddess of strategy, war, art, schools and trade. She corresponds to the Roman Minerva and the Greek Athena.



DETACHED FROM THE WORLD

Left, Uni as Juno Sospita; right, a small bronze statue, possibly of Tinia; on the opposite page, Menrva (at the National Archaeological Museum in Florence).



on the earth. At the intersection of the axes a ditch (or *mundus*) would be dug to connect the world of the living with that of the dead. Then, a bronze plough which was pulled either by a white ox or cow, would be used to create a furrow around the perimeter of the walls. This was interrupted at the point where the doors would be placed. It went from right to left in order to guarantee prosperity and was considered sacrosanct. Indeed anyone who crossed the line would be sentenced to death. A strip of

land (or *pomerium*) was left around the wall. This was for the gods and was left uncultivated. The ceremony would be completed with a ritual sacrifice. Every detail had to be perfect: if there was a mistake, the whole process had to start all over again.

The place that was designated for most of the rituals was the temple. It was consecrated to a protective divinity and was built on the northern side of the city with the facade facing south. None of these temples have survived because they

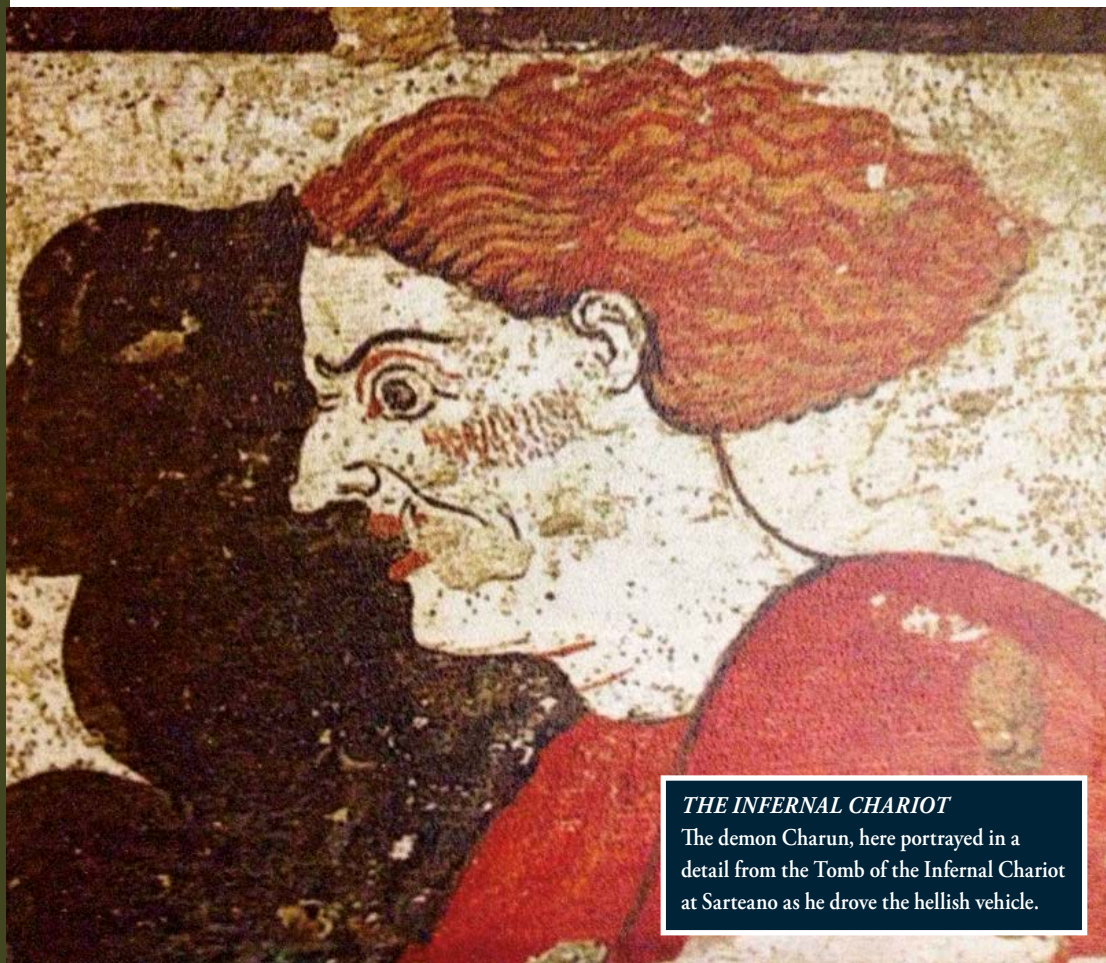
were built with perishable materials: the tuff walls and columns were covered in coloured terracotta while the wooden roof was covered in tiles. We know what they looked like, however, thanks to the Roman architect Vitruvius and to archaeological findings. They had a square shape with a column at the entrance which was divided into three sections. The roof and the beams were embellished by statues and figures of animals, gorgons and satyrs. The temple itself was built on a base that made it higher than the rest of the



## A HOST OF MONSTROUS DEMONS

For the Etruscans the afterlife was populated by a host of demonic figures, depicted on tomb paintings. They not only accompanied the deceased on their final journey but also appeared at crimes and killings, warning those about to die of their impending fate. The demons had different characteristics, but they shared a livid, monstrous appearance. The most well-known are Cerberus, the savage three-headed dog, and Charun (Charon, in the picture on the right), the grim, blue-tinged being who accompanied the dead into the afterworld, beating them with hammer blows all the while.

Then there are the winged Tuchulcha demons, whose faces were made up of parts of different creatures, and the Achrumene, armed with axes and probably guardians of the river Acheron. Finally, there was Cerun (Geryon), a fearsome three-headed man. Of all of them only the female winged demon Vanth seemed to be benign – she guided spirits into the hereafter, holding a lit torch. Some Etruscan demons, also mentioned by the Romans, crossed the threshold of time and were recast as guardians of hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, who knew of them through the Latin classics.



### THE INFERNAL CHARIOT

The demon Charun, here portrayed in a detail from the Tomb of the Infernal Chariot at Sarteano as he drove the hellish vehicle.

residential area, and it was necessary to climb a staircase in order to enter it.

As for the gods that were worshipped, they were very similar to those of the Greeks and the Romans. If indeed in the ancient era the Etruscans were inclined to recognise manifestations of the elements, after the influx of Hellenic culture the

gods became more anthropomorphic.

The most important of these gods was Tinia (the Greek Zeus, the Roman Jupiter), who ruled the heavens with his wife Uni (Juno-Hera) and their daughter Menrva (Minerva-Athena). The afterlife, on the other hand, was dominated by demonic figures like Charun (the Greek

Charon), who accompanied the spirits to their fate, or Tuchulcha, the demon of death, who was similar to a vulture but with a head that was covered in snakes. There were also local gods, like Voltumna (who was also known as Veltha or Vel), the supreme god of the Etruscan pantheon (the Roman scholar Marcus Ter-

entius Varro called him “deus Etruriae princeps”), the protector of the city of Volsinii and the title holder of the Fanum Voltumnae (the shrine of Voltumna). Voltumna had no equivalent in Greek or Roman culture, but could be considered as a manifestation of Tinia.

The life of the Etruscans was governed by precise rules which the Romans called the Etruscan discipline (Tesus Rasnas) and which was set out in books that are known to us thanks to references by Roman authors. Etruscan religious beliefs are best summed up by the philosopher Seneca in his *Naturales quaestiones*: “We believe that lightning is caused when two clouds collide. The Etruscans, on the other hand, believe that two clouds collide with the intention of causing lightning.” For the Etruscans knowing how to interpret celestial phenomena meant possessing the key to understanding reality and one’s own destiny. Obviously not everyone was capable of doing this. Only priests were able to do so, after a long and complex apprenticeship.

### LIFE AND THE LIVER

The Etruscans believed that the liver was the symbol of life. It was the seat of affection, courage, intelligence and the reflection of the sacred celestial space. It was interpreted by the haruspices, priests or soothsayers who removed the still beating organ of the sacrificial animal and examined it in detail. Marks, lumps and scars acquired significance depending on where they appeared. Every detail was vital: in order to teach apprentices the haruspices used models of livers similar



to the bronze example found near Piacenza which reproduced the organ's subdivisions and the names of the gods that exerted an influence on each section.

Lightning, on the other hand, was studied by the *fulgurales*: it was believed that thunderbolts were thrown down by the gods as manifestations of their will. There were classified into 11 different types, according to their colour, violence and the area of the sky from which they came. They could be simple warnings, auspices, indicators of danger, or harbingers of destruction.

And then there were the augurs, whose job it was to observe the flight of birds. The Roman historian Livy explains that the principle used for interpreting it was more or less the same as that for lightning. Other rules were contained in the *Libri rituales* together with notions about the subdivision of time and the life cycles of men and states, and regulations concerning life after death. Many of the rites concerned funeral customs and included lamentations, feasts and sacrifices accompanied by music and dance. The cult of death was usually practised at home. Relatives were obliged to remember the deceased with offerings and periodic sacrifices to placate the soul and help it find peace.

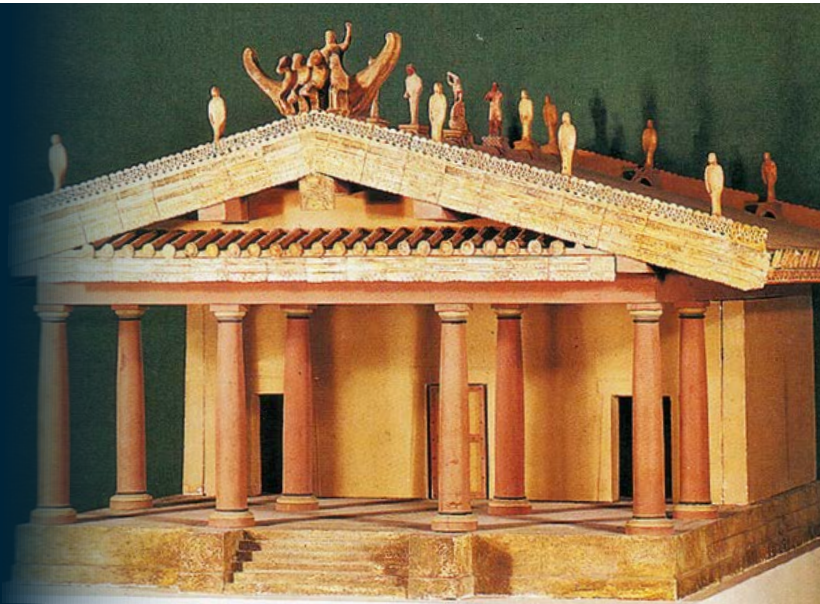
### THE LIFE CYCLE

For the Etruscans, the rules of life were fundamental. They had an "organic" conception of all forms of existence: not only men in flesh and bone, but also the states that they founded. The life of every living being was divided into cycles

### IN THE TEMPLE

A reconstruction of an Etruscan temple as described by Vitruvius. It does not seem very different from similar buildings constructed by the Greeks and Romans.

Statues, often very large, representing the most important divinities, stood on the top of the structure. The tiles were closed by antefixes, which often took the form of gorgons or other monstrous beings.



of seven years, with 12 cycles (in other words 84 years) being the longest possible life expectancy. The life of the average Etruscan man consisted of 10 cycles (70 years): in the last year of each cycle, which was considered the most critical, particular attention had to be paid to the signs sent by the gods: this concept lives on to this day in the idea of the "seven year itch" in marriage. The duration of human life, like that of States, was pre-established by the gods: for nations, the cycles were known as *saecula* (centuries), whose duration was not, however, fixed, but varied according to divine will. The Etruscans believed that a state couldn't last for more than 10 cycles: in this case the gods similarly sent a series of signs at the end of each cycle. These included comets, epidemics, floods and droughts

which were designed to show men that a cycle had come to an end and that another one was about to begin.

### MAGIC AND SACRIFICES

The attitudes and beliefs of the Etruscans were reflected in behaviour throughout the day, particularly during ritual sacrifices. As previously stated, the innards were interpreted by the haruspices. The Etruscans divided the sacrificial victims into two categories: the *hostiae consultoriae*, with which it was possible to observe divine will, and *hostiae animales*, whose killing could placate angry gods. Sheep were the animals that were generally used for this bloodthirsty ritual. For the omen to be valid, the animal had to be completely healthy and could not appear unwilling to face its fate. The instru-

ments used for sacrifice were similar to those used by the Romans: a large hatchet (*sacena* in Latin) and a knife with a triangular blade (*secespita*), a large base with a carved cylindrical handle. The ritual took place on an altar and was accompanied by the recital of precise formulas to the sound of flute music.

Another widespread Etruscan ritual was that of "burying" (*condere*, in Latin) lightning. Indeed it was believed that a place that had been struck by lightning was sacred in that it had been chosen by the god Tinia: and thus no one else could go there and desecrate it. First and foremost, it was necessary to hide (in a metaphorical sense) the lightning itself by burying all the objects that had been struck by it, in the same place (this included human victims, who could not be cremated in this case). The location then had to be fenced off. A sheep with two teeth (i.e. a two-year-old, seeing as teeth appeared at that age) would then be sacrificed on that particular spot. The place would be known as a *bidental* or a *fulguritum*.

Even if the Romans considered Etruscan religion to be too pervasive in everyday life, in addition to being fanatical (the Christian writer Arnobius, writing in the 4th century AD, described Etruria as "the mother of all superstition"), they were also fascinated by it. Not only did they pass onto posterity the vast range of rituals and beliefs (and this is why most of the relative terminology is in Latin), but they even adopted some of them. This is a sign that, in spite of everything, the Romans considered themselves the heirs to this important and profound tradition.



# A FEAST FOR THE DECEASED

*Funerals were long and complicated. Their purpose was to guarantee peace for the deceased, so that they wouldn't come back and torment the living. The ritual culminated in a feast: this was seen as a chance to bid farewell to a loved one in a serene manner, but also to show one off's wealth*

**T**he Etruscans attached great importance to rituals surrounding death and they dedicated a lot of time and resources to honouring the deceased. It was hoped that, once the latter had gone on to the afterlife, they could calmly continue their existence, without disturbing the land of the living. Separation from relatives was traumatic and mourning was expressed openly and even ostentatiously, as was the case with the Greeks and other Mediterranean populations. Etruscan rituals did, however, evolve with the passage of time. In the earlier period, for example, the differences between social classes weren't particularly marked, but contact with Greek culture led the nobility to see funerals as an expression of status. They would embellish tombs with grave goods that consisted of vases, jewels and other ornaments which were often imported from Greece.



**GIVING THANKS TO THE GODS**  
Etruscan statuettes from Fonte Venezziana (Arezzo), now in the Archaeology Museum of Florence.

## BURIAL OR CREMATION?

As for funeral practices, there is plenty of evidence of both burial and cremation. In the early days at least, the Etruscans tended to burn the bodies of the dead, while the other populations with which they came into contact in Italy preferred burial. This prompted the Etruscans to follow suit, at least in some cases, perhaps as a way of distinguishing

the roles of the deceased in society. There weren't, however, precise rules and this is evident if individual necropoleis are examined. At Pontecagnano, for example, it would appear that during the early period, i.e. the first half of the 9th century BC, cremation was the method of choice for male adults and the more visible members of the community, while burial was for women. At least this

was the case if they were indigenous and therefore not of pure Etruscan blood. Cremation, on the other hand, was particularly common in the area around Chiusi (near Siena). During the second half of the century, the diversity in the rituals began to disappear and cremation was used for both sexes, becoming prevalent at the start of the 8th century BC.

The ashes were placed in tombs of

various types. But things were to change again midway through the 8th century BC. Burial became an exclusive ritual. The tombs of aristocrats, which were dug out under a mound of earth, were monumental and grandiose: the richer and more important the family, the larger the tomb. It would host many members of the same clan, including *lautni* (freed slaves).

As the equivalent of the middle classes grew, monumental tombs were replaced by “cities of the dead” (necropoleis) which were carefully laid out. Portraits of the deceased also appeared on the urns. They often depicted them as they took part in the feast, lounging on the triclinium (the three-piece sofa used in dining rooms at the time – ed). The concept of the afterlife also evolved with the passage of time: initially, the most important thing was for the memory of the deceased to be preserved by their descendants, and for this reason the tomb recreated the earthly home, with ornaments and furniture. Gradually, another concept of death began to take hold, namely that the soul would have to live with that of the other deceased, in the kingdom of the dead, rather than in the sepulchre. This idea was modelled on the Greek concept of Avernus, the entrance to the underworld which was governed by the Gods Aita and Phersipnai (Hades and Persephone in Hellenic culture).

### THE LAST BREATH

The Etruscans believed that death took place when the soul left the body through the lips; in other words, with the deceased’s last breath. At that point



### CANOPIC VASES

Canopic vases, which were common at Chiusi in the first half of the 6th century BC, were used for the ashes of the deceased. The lids often had a human form that recalled the features of the person in question. Indeed they were so expressive that they can be seen as the prototype for portraits in Italy.

Even though they were considered typically Etruscan, they were also common in ancient Egypt. In this case their use was, however, slightly different: they contained the bowels of the deceased which had been removed during the mummification process.

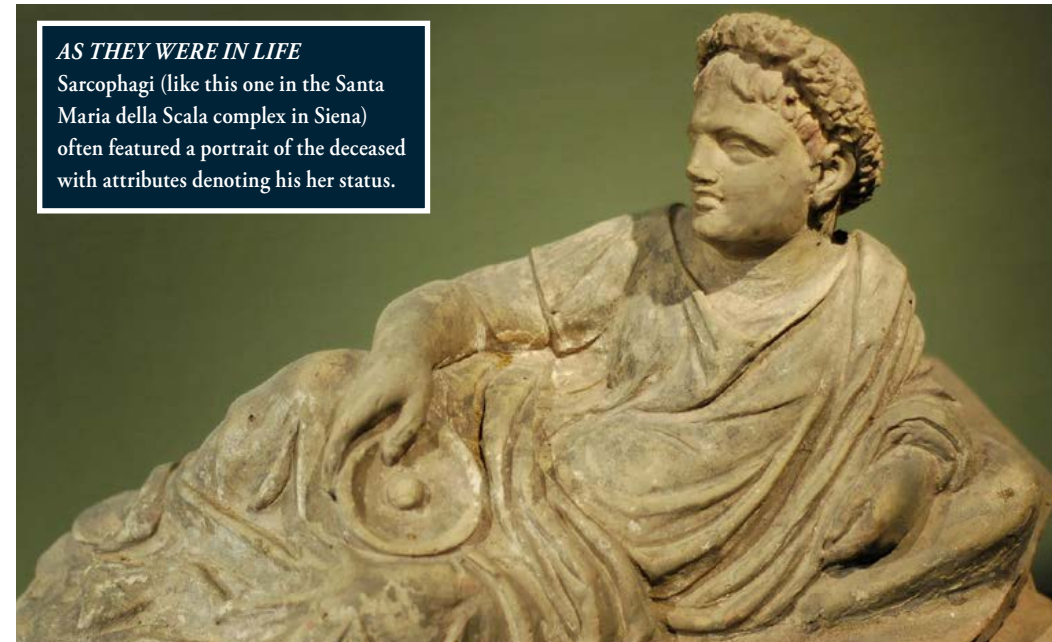
the name of the person in question was called out three times: once the death had been confirmed, the eyes of the corpse were closed and friends and relatives cried out in pain, and then wept loudly. The Etruscans believed that, until the deceased were either cremated or buried, they could carry on interacting with the land of the living – and not necessarily in a benign way. In order to ward off danger for the community, relatives were therefore obliged to remain isolated for the time it took to complete the funeral ceremony. In this way the “contamination” wouldn’t spread. This state of affairs was announced with the branch of a cypress or another tree that produced dark fruits (the colours of

death). This was placed on the wall or the door of the house that was in mourning, so that people could keep away.

The body of the deceased was washed and sprinkled with aromatic oils that were kept in special receptacles, like the *aryballos*, a small spherical vase, and the longer *lekythos*, which had a narrow bottleneck. After the ritual cleansing and the sprinkling with ointment, the corpse was dressed and placed on a bed, with the feet towards the entrance. As the surrounding area was filled with the smell of burning incense and other essences, the floors of the house were carefully swept with a broom. This was thought to have apotropaic powers (in other words, it could ward off evil spirits). Once the relatives and friends of the deceased had

### AS THEY WERE IN LIFE

Sarcophagi (like this one in the Santa Maria della Scala complex in Siena) often featured a portrait of the deceased with attributes denoting his/her status.





# TYPES OF ETRUSCAN TOMB

## WELLS (10th-6th CENTURY BC)

A well-like pit was dug either in the ground or in the rock and then covered over. The ashes were placed in biconical urns and positioned at the bottom along with ritual objects and grave goods. The ossuary was then closed with a helmet in the case of male tombs and with a bowl in the case of female tombs.



## MOUNDS (8th-6th CENTURY BC)

They consisted of a circular structure (the tambour), made from blocks of stone and surmounted by a dome which was also made of stone. Inside a corridor (*dromos*) led to the funeral chamber, which faced east, where the body of the deceased was placed on a stone bed and surrounded by the grave goods, in compartments to the side. At the end of the ritual, the *dromos* was sealed off with stones and earth in order to prevent the tomb from being desecrated.

## GRAVES (8th-5th CENTURY BC)

A simple grave (rectangular for burial, square for ashes) contained the remains of the deceased, together with their grave goods. The graves were closed with pebbles, stone slabs and shingles.



## CHESTS (7th-5th CENTURY BC)

They consisted of heavy trunks (usually made of tuff, a type of rock) featuring a lid with two layers, which contained the deceased and their grave goods.



## AEDICULES (6th-5th CENTURY BC)

Aedicules are small rectangular stone houses with double roofs, and a single room that was usually open. They were fairly rare and had the appearance of small temples (this would explain their Latin name, which derives from *aedes*, "temple").

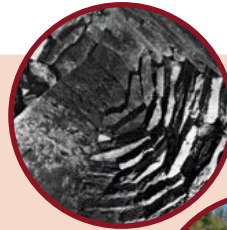


## HYPOGEA, OR CHAMBERS (7th-4th CENTURY BC)

They were dug out of the tuff and were either subterranean or semi-subterranean, and had various forms. The interiors contained decorations that reproduced the houses of the living, with numerous rooms and furnishings.

## THOLOS (THE LATE ORIENTALISING PERIOD)

They were based on the tombs of the Mycenaean kings and featured a dome. They were built on the side of a hill where the stones were aligned in overlapping concentric circles that ultimately closed the vault. The circular room (which sometimes featured a central pillar) was then covered in earth so as to recreate the original shape of the hill. The sarcophagus was positioned in a smaller space next to the larger circular room which was covered by a false dome. Access to the tomb was via a *dromos*, which was either open or covered. These tombs were used by the same aristocratic clans for generations.



## COLOMBARIUM (FROM THE 3rd CENTURY BC)

These consisted of small cells about 20 to 30 cm for each side, in which the ashes of the deceased were placed, either in vases or urns, together with modest grave goods. This type of burial was used by the lower social classes and dates back to the later Etruscan and Roman period.



## WELLS (II-I SECOLO BC)

The structure was like that of a well and was up to 10 metres deep. The sepulchral chamber was at the bottom and could be reached by notch-like rungs or steps.



## CAPUCHIN HOOD (IMPERIAL ROMAN ERA)

Its shape was similar to that of the hood of a Capuchin monk. It consisted of a cover made of shingles or stone slabs. These were placed alongside the body and joined at the top, and then covered in earth. It was a modest form of burial, as is evident in the grave goods, which tended to be simple.



completed their mourning, the body was prepared for the funeral ritual. The cortege, for which all the mourners wore black, followed the body to the pyre (or to the tomb, in the case of burial). Cremation occurred at night on a resinous wooden pile, upon which incense and fragrances were thrown. A member of the family would light the fire by throwing a torch to the back of the pile, so as to avoid being cursed by the deceased. Once the fire had burnt out, the remaining bones would be carefully gathered and washed in either milk or wine. Once they were dried, they would be placed in the urn. At this point the remains were taken to the burial site, which was outside the city walls. When the deceased's relatives got there, a ritual sacrifice would take place (involving a sheep, goat, or even a pig): it was believed that the animal's warm blood would appease the souls of the dead, thereby enabling them to reach the afterlife.

### OFF TO THE SYMPOSIUM

The flesh of the sacrificed animal was then used for the funeral feast, in which the soul of the deceased was believed to take part, and which also served the purpose of purifying everyone present.

The quality of the food and the number of guests at the feast enabled the deceased's family to show off their social status. An Etruscan tomb dating back to the 6th century BC offers some interesting evidence. Not only does it feature classic ceramic finds, there are also some of the utensils used for the preparation of the feast, as well as a set of objects including the point of a lance with its tip (*sauroter*), not to mention items for killing and cooking the sacrificial

animal (such as andirons and skewers). The remarkable thing about these objects is the material from which they were made: lead. It is a pliable metal that melts at low temperatures and could therefore not be used for the ritual. It is more likely that it was specifically designed to accompany the deceased to the afterlife.

In light of the iconography that has been found in older burial sites (prior to the 6th century BC), it would seem that women did not take part in the funeral feasts: they never appear in the illustrative material. Yet they do begin to take part in the ritual of the symposium from about 500 BC. This involved the drinking of wine, music, danc-

ing and gymnastics. The presentation at funeral feasts was simple and practical. There was a single "service" table (*kylikeion*) upon which vases were placed for pouring the wine. All the diners had a small, low table (*trapeza*) where they could put their food and eat in comfort. Usually, the furnishings used in the symposia included bucchero jugs (*oinochoe*), chalices and goblets of various types, such as the *kylikes*, which were shallow and broad, and the *kantharoi*, which featured two high vertical handles. Often these ceramics came from Greece and were finely decorated, and for this reason they were considered luxury items.

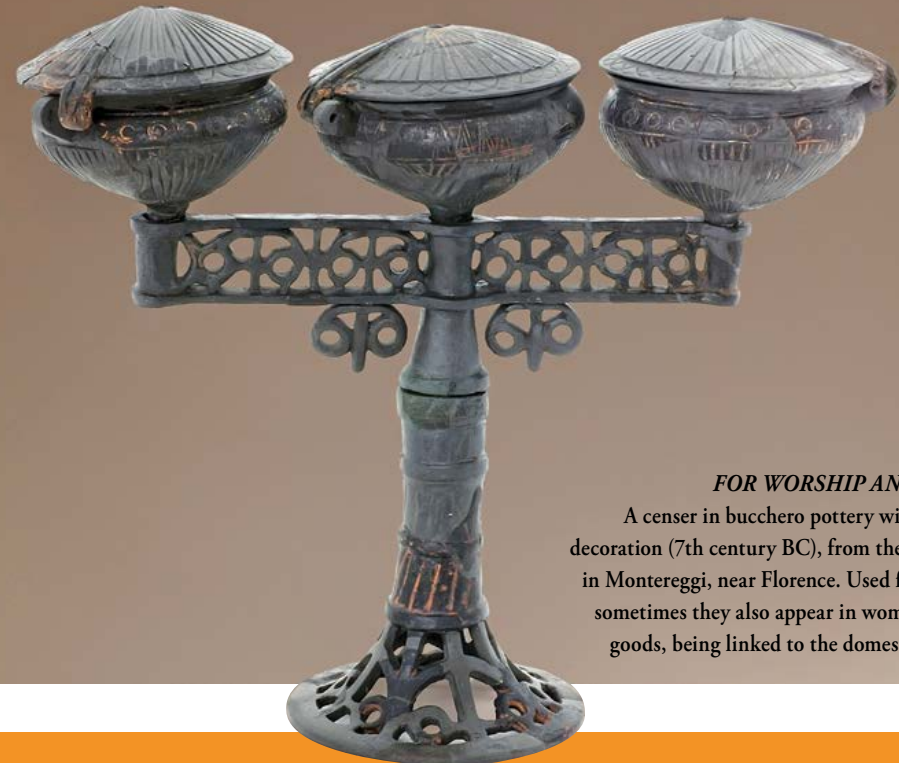
Once the banquet was over, the urn con-

taining the ashes of the deceased (or else the body, along with the offerings: cereals, fruit, milk, wine, cheeses, focaccia bread, vegetable soup) was placed in the sepulchre, which was then sealed. Nine days later, the ritual of the animal sacrifice and the feast was repeated. This time it was just for the relatives, who brought food that was associated with the world of the dead: grapes, lentils, beans and salt. At the end of the dinner the sepulchre was officially declared inviolable by the living. Anyone who had been involved in the mourning process was readmitted to the community at large, thereby ending the isolation to which they had been forcibly subjected.

### THE SMELL OF INCENSE

During funeral rites the Etruscans used incense, which they burnt in special containers made of bronze, bucchero or pear wood (known as *thymiateria*). Incense was also common in rituals in the Far East and Egypt, while there is evidence of libanomancy (the art of telling the future by observing the spirals of smoke) in Etruscan civilisation.

In order to obtain this precious substance the Etruscans were obliged to import it: the essence, which was extracted from plants which grew in Somalia and the Arabian peninsula, was probably brought to Italy by Phoenician merchants. Incense was also used in other types of feasts, and not just those associated with funerals. That would explain why in some cases it formed part of a woman's grave goods, as it was related to domestic life.



#### FOR WORSHIP AND MORE

A censer in bucchero pottery with pierced decoration (7th century BC), from the cemetery in Montereggi, near Florence. Used for rituals, sometimes they also appear in women's grave goods, being linked to the domestic sphere.



# TRAVELLING WITH THE ETRUSCANS

Of the 12 Etruscan city states, six of them were located in Tuscany: Chiusi, Vetulonia, Volterra, Cortona, Arezzo and Fiesole. But, in addition to these important urban centres, there is also a vast amount of evidence of the Etruscans and their culture in many

other places throughout the region. By following the clues and signs that they left you can explore the land of the Etruscans in a fascinating journey back in time. And in so doing you will realise that this ancient people is in fact more contemporary than might at first appear to be the case.



In Southern Tuscany you can walk along the spectacular “Vie Cave” (Sunken Roads), which were dug out of the earth and are submerged in woods. Here you can almost hear the echoes of footsteps of over 2,000 years ago. In addition to the archaeological sites of cities that have disappeared, and the necropoleis, many of the locations are old towns and villages of Etruscan origin. It is a millennial stratification of lives and people, as well as historical and cultural events.

On the coast, on the other hand, further remnants of Etruscan life remind us of their commercial activity in this part of Tuscany. Thanks to the mines on Elba and the “Colline Metallifere” (Metal-bearing Hills), the Etruscans were able to work with iron and bronze. They also exported these products, as is evident from the presence of ports and other settlements near the sea.

In addition to the iron and bronze master craftsmen, there were also goldsmiths and ceramic artists whose creativity, not to mention their eclectic and international nature, means that their work still seems contemporary after 2,000 years. And with this in mind, in many museums in Tuscany you can admire decorative and practical objects and imagine Etruscan women combing their hair and putting on their make-up prior to going out, or attending banquets and meeting their friends. You can also see the lamps, tables and other furniture that made the Etruscan home such a warm and welcoming place.

It was an extraordinarily natural environment, with a marked emphasis on beauty, which was both inventive and creative. These were the “secrets” that enabled the Etruscans to create and produce, over the centuries, excellence, under the guidance of the idea of harmony. This started with the countryside, and continued with masterpieces of art, as well as aromas and tastes that have survived the test of time, and which are still attractive to us today.

Enjoy your journey, in search of the Etruscans!  
[visittuscany.com](http://visittuscany.com)



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