

PART I

From the Origins to the Empire

I / ITALY BEFORE ROME

In the middle of the eighth century BC, the time assigned by tradition to the founding of Rome, Italy was a patchwork of peoples, some long settled, others still on the move. Among these peoples, two became established who rapidly came to dominate the north and south of the peninsula: the Etruscans and the Greeks, both, very early on, exercising a profound influence on the budding township that was to become Rome. With the Phoenicians who set up their trading posts and the Greeks their colonies, the East gained predominance in the western half of the Mediterranean basin.

THE PEOPLES OF PRIMITIVE ITALY

Of the pre-Indo-European, Mediterranean inhabitants of Italy, composed of aboriginals and of immigrants from overseas, several elements survived, such as the Ligures, primitive mountain-dwellers, settled north of Etruria on the shores of the Gulf of Genoa and in the Maritime Alps. Likewise the Sicani, Sicilian aboriginals, according to tradition, who had been pushed back to the southwestern part of the island (around Gela and Agrigentum) by the Siculi, who had come from the Italian peninsula in the thirteenth or eleventh century BC (unless these two peoples were related, if not identical). In the view of most modern authors, the Siculi have a fundamentally Mediterranean background: their matriarchal customs, traces of which remain in the rites of sacred prostitution practiced later in the sanctuary of Aphrodite on Mount Eryx, were foreign to the customs of Indo-European populations. They seem to have been closely related to the Oenotri, the Chones, the Morgates, and the Itali (originally only the tip of Bruttium was called Italy), names given by the Greeks – who regarded them all as Pelasgi (prehistoric inhabitants of Greece) – to the indigenous populations of the south of the peninsula. Here we may recognize the all-Pelasgic doctrine inspired by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek who aimed to prove that the Italians were Greek in origin, an obviously incorrect generalization.

A pre-Indo-European substratum therefore existed, but it was not homogeneous, although linguists have claimed to find traces of a linguistic community. Some historians hold that these peoples, the Pelasgi, Ligures, Siculi, Oenotri, etc., who according to the legend recounted by Virgil were at the origin of primitive Rome, all boil down to a single unity, one founded on the mythological relationships whose beginnings lie in Arcadia. According to Virgil, Rome was even an Arcadian foundation. Of course, this is legend, but “a fable is a historical fact, and one of the most valuable because it reveals to us the soul of dead peoples” (J. Bayet). The Arcadians certainly played an effective role in the colonization of southern Italy, whence the Arcadian legends reached Latium.

Following the Indo-European invasions which, in the second millennium, submerged the greater part of Europe, Iran and India, new transalpine peoples came to settle in Italy, often overlaying older, indigenous strata. Thus we find:

- The Veneti in the region of the Po delta. Of Illyrian origin, according to Herodotus, they maintained close relations with the coastal regions of the western Adriatic. The inscriptions of Este, Magre (near Vicenza), and Padua bear witness to the use of an archaic Indo-European language.
- Later, in the sixth–fifth centuries by infiltration, and then in the fourth in a massive flood, came the Celtic populations: Insubres, Cenomani, Boii, Lingones, and Senones. They became so dominant in the Po valley that it came to be called Cisalpine Gaul. Their authority and culture spread as far as Etruscan Felsina (Bologna), whose historic role as the gateway to the main passage from the Po valley to Tuscany was then established.
- The Umbri, who for a time were dominant in central Italy, occupied the hinterland of the Adriatic coast as far as the upper Tiber. Their Osco-Umbrian language is known notably from the famous text of the Etruscan Tablets, seven bronze plaques which give the rituals and tutelary divinities of the town of Iguvium (Gubbio) on the River Metaurus.
- On the same coast, they were followed by the Piceni, who settled in the region of Ancona.
- Farther south, the Sabines and Samnites adjoined the Latini on the east and south-east. These populations, known as “Sabelli,” were joined by the Marsi on the borders of Lake Fucinus, the Volsci in the Pontine plain, and the Campani in the Naples region, where they encountered the Osci and the Ausoni, who had settled there before them. The name Osci (farmers) derives from *Ops*, which means productive activity and is found in *opus*, indicating work and especially work on the land.
- Still farther south, on the Adriatic coast, were to be found the Frentani, the Apuli, including the Messapian-speaking Daunians and Peucetians, and lastly, around Tarentum, the Iapygians or Messapians, whose Illyrian origin,

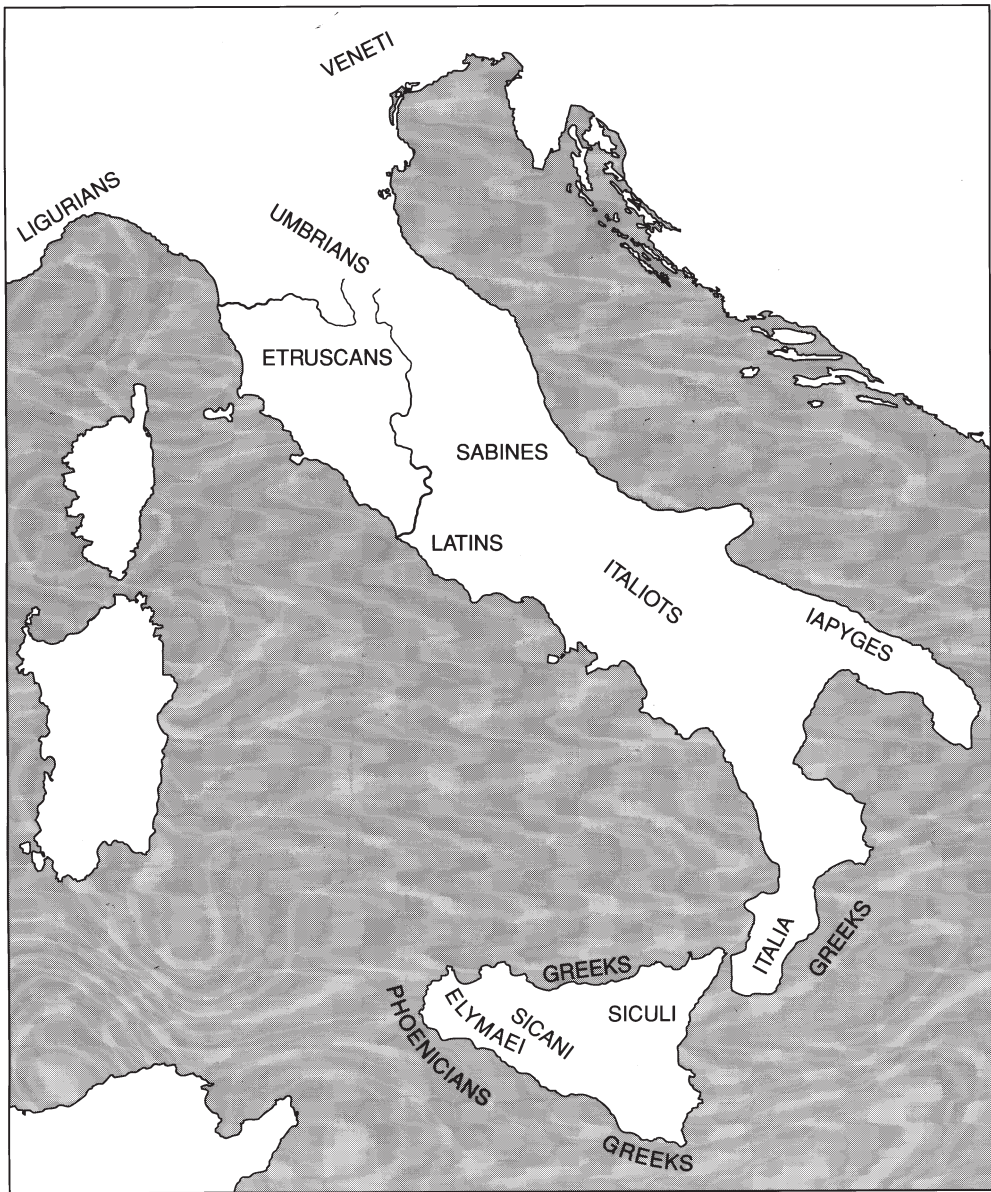


Figure 1.1 Italy in the eighth century BC: the Italic peoples

attributed to them by the early authors, is confirmed by a study of the names of both places and peoples.

- On the other side of the “boot,” the Lucani and Bruttii overlay the indigenous strata represented by the Oenotri, Chones, Morgates, and Itali.
- In the midst of all these peoples, the Latini occupied only the plain of central Italy between the Tiber and the Alban Hills. It is a plain dotted with hills capable of providing refuge and defense, giving onto the Tyrrhenian sea by way of a coast that is scarcely hospitable, it is true, and linked to the hinterland by a navigable river, the Tiber, that played an essential role in the choice of Rome’s site. In proto-historic Italy, the Latins were probably the oldest and certainly the most important of the Indo-European peoples who had migrated to the peninsula. Recent excavations of the burial sites of Lavinium, Antium, and Villa Cavaletti have revealed for the period between 1000 and 875 BC hut-shaped cinerary urns, the same as have been excavated from the pit tombs on the site of the Roman Forum. There, as in Rome, the rite of body burial only gradually replaced that of cremation. From among the small towns of Latium, archaeology also gives us findings that confirm the primacy of Alba over Rome, a primacy already attested by literary sources.
- Northward, beyond the Tiber, as far as the Arno and the Apennines, stretched the land of the Etrusci. The origin of this people remains an enigma and, to say the least, much argued about. Did they come from the north or the east? (The land of Urartu, present-day Armenia, has been suggested, for the same cauldrons with griffons’ heads are found there as in Etruria.) Or were they aboriginals subjected to various cultural influences? Each theory has arguments and objections for and against. Perhaps it must be allowed that they were not a new people, but rather a new civilization which developed in an indigenous setting.

One thing is certain: by the early seventh century, those whom the Greeks called Tyrrhenoi and the Latins Etrusci or Tusci had become strongly established in Etruria, and, contrary to what was long believed, as early as that time their sphere of influence extended beyond the River Silarus (Sele) as far as the Salerno region. They soon colonized Campania – at Volturnum (Capua) and Pompeii, Etruscan inscriptions furnish the proof. And toward the north they extended their influence, if not their dominion, as far as the Po valley, where traces of their culture abound. There, as in their own area, they created towns: Felsina (Bologna) and Melpum (Milan) are two instances.

THE CULTURES OF PRIMITIVE ITALY

The cultures of primitive Italy were less varied than the peoples themselves. It would be erroneous to make a firm distinction, using the evidence of funerary rites, even between, on the one hand, the cultures of the aboriginal peoples, or at least the ones belonging to the Mediterranean substratum, and on the other, those of the peoples of Indo-European origin. For the separation can no longer be maintained between those who exclusively practiced body burial (the first) and those who used only cremation (the second). At the most one may speak of dominant customs; a mixture of customs came into effect very early on. Among one and the same people cremation and inhumation were practiced sometimes in the same period and sometimes in successive periods. Funerary rites, therefore, do not always constitute a criterion for belonging to a specific ethnic group.

There was also a relative uniformity in ways of life. Except in the Apennines, where very primitive mountain-dwellers lived (from the Abruzzi came the strange colossal statue of the masked warrior of Capestrano), pastoral and agricultural ways of life went on side by side, together with survivals of hunting and fishing. The result of both land and climate – one sixth of Italian soil is mountainous and grassland – livestock breeding and the practice of transhumance occupied an essential place in rural activity: either they predominated or, as in Tuscany and central Italy, they complemented agriculture. There in the spring the flocks gave place to crops. From Latium the flocks moved annually toward rich Umbria. From that came trade between the two regions, and with trade, conflict. Hence also the importance of the Tiber in their relations. All this economic activity nevertheless remained at a very primitive level.

On the other hand, there was a wide variety of languages, even if some of them show affinities. For the most part they belonged to the Indo-European family, one of them at least of a very archaic branch. Indo-European was indeed an enduring cultural element. Latin, for example, preserved Indo-European words designating the most ancient forms of religious, constitutional, and family life expressed in Indo-European: e.g. *rex, flamen, credo, pater, mater*.

Closely akin to Latin is Faliscan. Venetan is known by inscriptions on votive stelae from Este; Umbrian by the Gubbio Tablets; and its relative, Oscan, was used by all the peoples of the south-west. The Sabines, Marsi, Volsci, and Piceni similarly had their own dialects.

Outside these Indo-European languages, but penetrated by elements borrowed from them, was Ligurian. There was also Messapian or Iapygian, which has affinities with Illyrian. And there was also, of course, Etruscan, to which we shall return. For among this mix of cultures in the Italy of the eighth century BC, there was one that stood out clearly from the rest by virtue of its progress and its brilliance.

ETRUSCAN CULTURE

This highly original civilization was characterized by three principal features. First and foremost it was an urban civilization. In an Italy of villages, Etruria alone had towns. These were ritually founded and were endowed with enclosing walls, gates, and temples built in stone, features that would be passed on to Roman town development. It was a federation of twelve city-states with magistrates who, in the event of grave danger, would make themselves subject to a dictator (*macstrna* = *mastarna*). This later happened in Rome, at the end of the reign of the first of the Tarquins, with the coming to power of Mastarna (= Servius Tullius). A state structure, of course, implies political and social institutions. Governed first by kings (*lucumons*) surrounded by *fasces*, symbols of their authority, and adorned with well-known insignia (the gold crown and scepter surmounted by an eagle), the Etruscan peoples replaced them in the fifth century with annual magistrates or *zilath* (in Latin, *praetores*). Again, there was a similar political change in Rome from monarchy to republic in the early fifth century. Etruscan society was patrician and almost feudal: a class of nobles formed the oligarchy of the *principes* (men of note who held power in the cities), until the rural plebeians forced their way in. Below was an immense servile class (though slaves could be emancipated and, once freed, could join the followers of the great men).

Moreover, in a primitive rural Italy, the Etruscan civilization was materially and technically developed. Thanks to an advanced knowledge of hydraulics, the Etruscans practiced drainage and irrigation. Furthermore, skilled craftsmen, who were not unaware of Greek techniques, constructed for them shafts and tunnels to exploit the deposits of tin, copper, and iron which abounded in Etruria. These and the iron on the island of Elba were made use of for commercial purposes. Among their most remarkable products were arms, tools, and domestic furnishings in bronze and iron (chiefly mirrors and small chests), and pottery (notably *impasto* and *bucchero nero*).

Their culture, both national and eclectic, assured the Etruscans of an unchallenged primacy in three fields, the best known and most enigmatic of which was religion. The Etruscan religion was a revealed religion, a religion of books (not of "the" Book, like the Bible of the Hebrews). The sacred books of the prophets, of whom the chief was Tages, laid down the Etruscan religion once and for all by setting out the rules concerning ritual and prescribing the life of states and of men (*libri rituales*), the manner of interpreting thunder and lightning (*libri fulgurales*), and the art and method of observing the entrails of sacrificial victims (*libri haruspicinales*), and by providing the knowledge necessary to conduct a man into the next world (*libri acheruntici*), the whole thing forming a science, the *disciplina Etrusca*. It was thus a highly ritualistic religion: the famous bronze liver of Piacenza, an image of the sky marked out in compartments bearing the names of the gods, was used as a reference

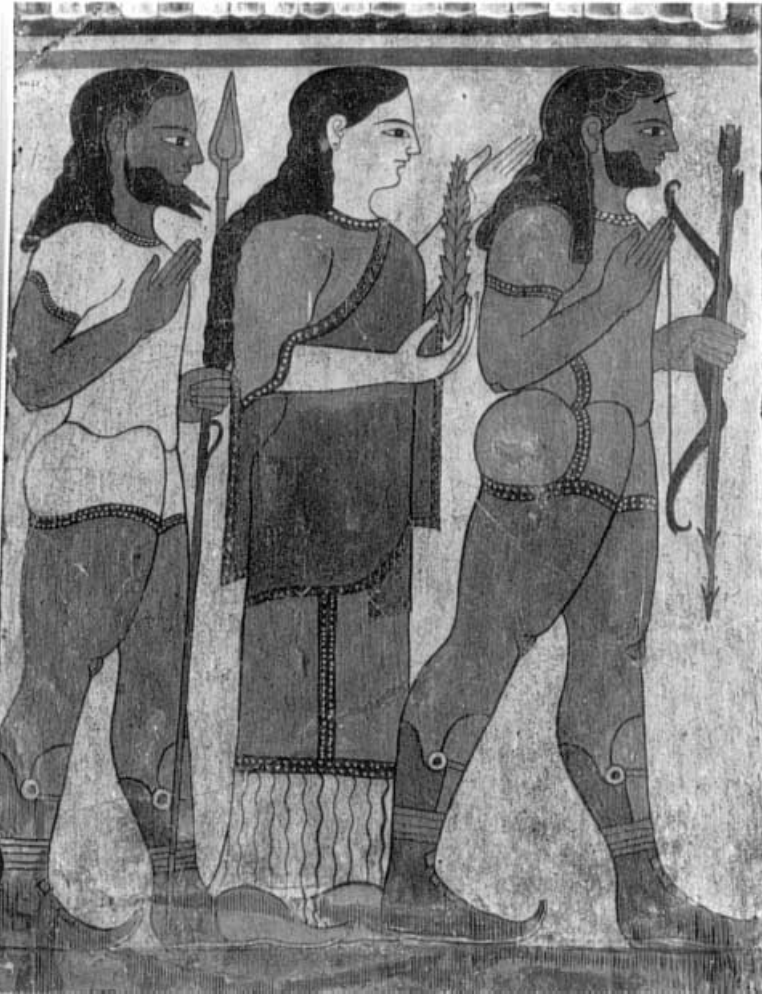


Plate 1.1 Etruscan tomb painting: Ceres, the goddess of grain, with armed attendants. 6th century BC

in hepatoscopy for examining the livers of animals offered to the gods. It was also a highly developed religion. Under a Triad (Tinia = Jupiter, Uni = Juno, Menrva = Minerva), venerated in tripartite temples (as the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome was to be), a pantheon was formed similar to that of the Greeks: Voltumna/Vertumnus, “the first of the gods of Etruria,” according to Varro, Turan = Aphrodite, Fufluns = Dionysos, Turms = Hermes, Sethlans = Hephaistos, Hercle = Herakles, Maris = Ares, Nethuns = Neptune, etc.



Plate 1.2 Etruscan terracotta sarcophagus: husband and wife reclining on a couch. Cerveteri, 6th century BC

In their conception of the next world, the Etruscans were, it seems, influenced by both the Middle East and Greece. Their Paradise was a place of coolness, music, and banquets; their Hell a place of melancholy and grief, of suffering and tortures for the wicked, a place where two monstrous spirits reigned, half-man half-beast, Charun (the Greek Charon) and Tuchulcha (see the Tarquinian tomb of Orcus, or Hades). However, the evil funerary divinities could be appeased by the blood of combatants (a rite some historians consider to be the origin of gladiatorial fights). Hence the scenes of funerary combat to be seen on the frescos of Etruscan tombs (notably those of Francesco of Vulci's tomb).

Etruscan art was no less developed or national than Etruscan religion. It too was very much influenced by Hellenism, which it introduced into central Italy. That influence appears particularly in:

- Sculpture in-the-round (e.g. the Apollo of Veii) and bas-reliefs, statuettes, tripods, and candelabra in bronze, and the painted terracotta decoration covering the temples. Starting in the fourth century, the decorating of sarcophagi and cinerary urns with mythological reliefs became the general practice.
- Painting, known particularly through the frescos in tombs, notably at Tarquinii; it has been said that Etruscan painting is a “reflection of the great archaic painting, lost in Greece.”
- Pottery: alongside the Greek vases, mainly Attic, revealed in their thousands by the necropoleis, a not inelegant native pottery (notably in *bucchero*) took its place. Greek vases were not only imported, but also made locally, for example the famous seventh-century water vases of Caere.

Etruscan architecture was no less splendid than Etruscan art. Rome was informed by it in three areas: town planning (checkerboard layout and enclosing walls in freestone, in immense polygonal bond, or rectangular bond, known as *opus quadratum*); the construction of temples (rectangular in plan, with a tripartite cella on a podium, and architectural decoration in polychrome terracotta); and the arrangement of tombs (either a funeral chamber topped by a tumulus and decorated with frescos, or a tomb made of rock, decorated and filled with precious objects). The great princely tombs of the seventh century (Regolini-Galassi at Caere, Bernardini and Barberini at Praeneste) are distinguished by the richness of their furnishings (gold, ivory, vases).

The Etruscan language, which bears, naturally enough, the traces of borrowings from Greek and Italic dialects, is no longer considered to be an Indo-European tongue – affinities are sought with Basque, Caucasian, and (chiefly) pre-Hellenic dialects. It is known to us through some 10,000 inscriptions, unfortunately for the most part very short, late-period epitaphs, allowing no great progress to be made in our knowledge of the language. The latest discovery (the Pyrgi inscriptions, bilingual in Etrusco-Punic) proved disappointing in this respect.

The Etruscan alphabet, disseminated throughout Italy, became the model by which Italy became literate.

THE EAST'S GRIP ON THE WEST

While the Etruscans settled north of the Tiber and rapidly extended their power as far as the Po valley in the north and Campania in the south, two other peoples were gaining a foothold in Italy: the Phoenicians and the Greeks. Their settlements bear witness to the vitality of the East and the strength of its expansion in the western Mediterranean.

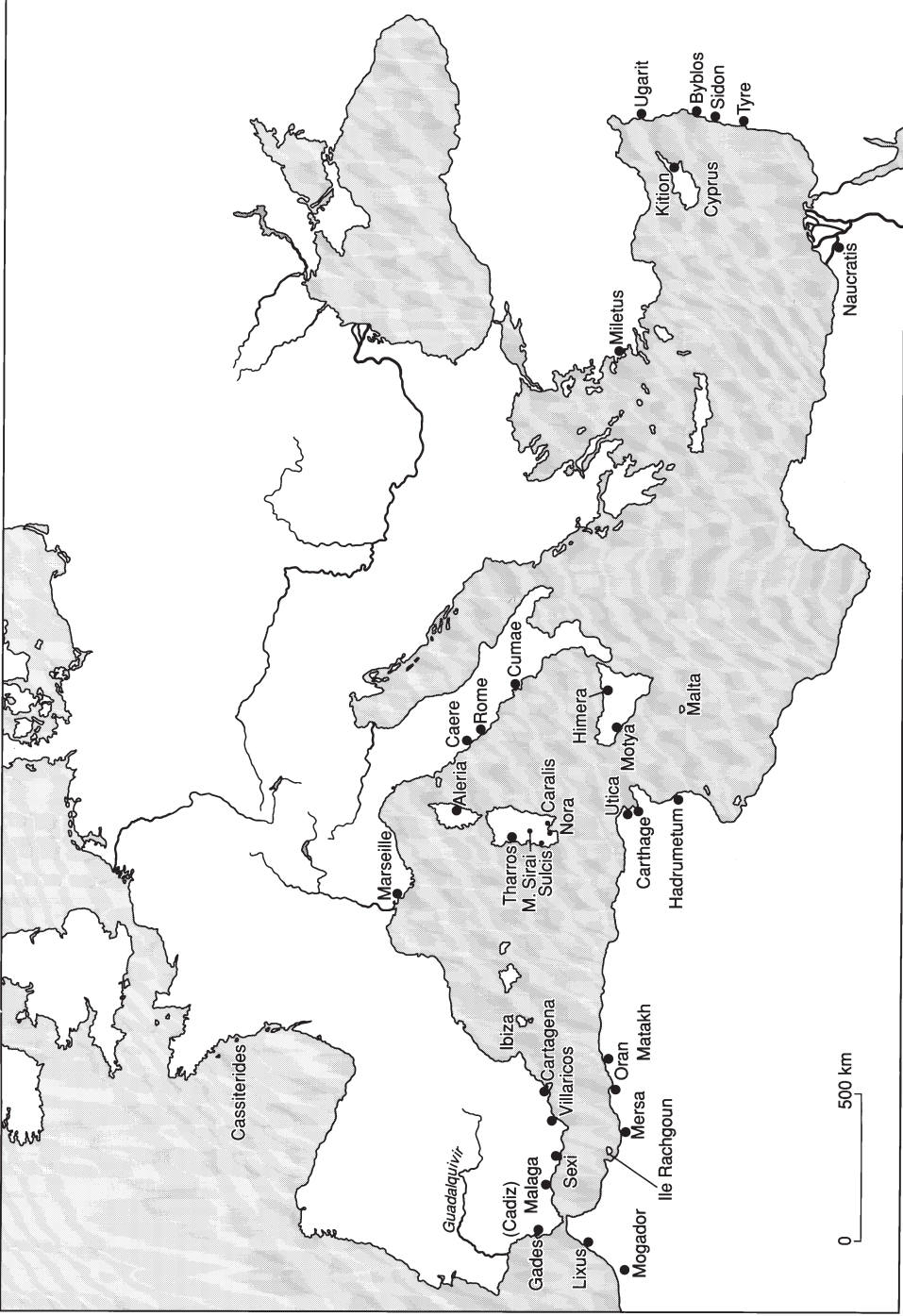


Figure 1.2 Phoenician expansion (from J. Heurgon, *Rome et la Méditerranée occidentale*, PUF, 1980)

PHOENICIAN SETTLEMENT AND CULTURE

At least as early as the eleventh century BC, Phoenician navigators from Tyre and Sidon had reconnoitered the African and Iberian coasts. The great princely tombs of Etruria disclose costly objects (in silver and ivory) imported from Phoenicia, or objects manufactured on the spot based on Phoenician models and ranges of images borrowed from the Middle East, revealing a period of eastern influence on Etruscan civilization in the eighth–seventh centuries. And the presence of Phoenician traders is attested not only in Sicily (at Motya), Sardinia (at Sulcis and Nora), and Malta as well, but in the eighth–seventh centuries in Rome itself, where a colony of Tyrians, as has been seen, was able to settle in the area of the Forum Boarium. The founding of the Ara Maxima Herculis, the earliest altar to Hercules in Italy, has been linked with the presence of Tyrian merchants. The features that have encouraged the making of this link are its location, in the Forum Boarium; the fact that its ritual, by its requirement of a tithe offered to the god here as in eastern markets, as well as its religious prohibitions (targeting women, dogs, pigs, and flies, all banned from the sacred precinct), recalls the ritual connected with the sanctuary of the Tyrian Baal-Melqart; the similarity established between the oldest representation of Hercules known in Italy (the god brandishing his club in his right hand) and that attributed to Melqart; the attachment of two families, the Potitii and the Pinarii, to the sanctuary, where they were the favored serving priests right up to the nationalization of the cult in 312 BC, the former having “Canaanite” characteristics (recognized by some, denied by others); and lastly the appearance of the clothing worn by the participants, long “feminine” tunics. Although the link has still not been demonstrated with certainty, there are many indications of its probability, in Rome as, a little later, in Pozzuoli in Campania.

THE GREEKS IN ITALY AND SICILY

Far better known than the coming of the Phoenicians, affirmed by writings and well supported by archaeology, the arrival of the Greeks in the West, and chiefly in southern Italy and Sicily, constituted one of the major events in the history of the Mediterranean in the first millennium BC.

As in the Aegean and on the borders of the Black Sea, Greek colonization began in the Tyrrhenian Sea during the eighth century. Cumae appears to have been both the northernmost and the oldest of the Greek colonial foundations in Italy (ca. 770), followed by Ischia (ca. 740). Other settlements, first of Chalcidian origin, next Megarean, Corinthian, Achaean, and Lacedaemonian, and then Rhodian, Cretan, and Ionian (from Asia Minor), were established, on the one side between Cumae and Rhegium (Reggio di Calabria), and on the other (the instep of the “boot”) as far as Tarentum and beyond, as well as along the whole perimeter of Sicily (Trinacria). The density of settlement was such



Figure 1.3 Greek colonization (from J. Heurgon, *Rome et la Méditerranée occidentale*, PUF, 1980)

that in the second century BC Polybius used the term “Magna Graecia” (Great Greece) to define that Hellenized south of Italy, a name transmitted by Cicero, who spoke of “the old Italian Greece, that used to be called Great.” In fact the name must go back to the sixth century.

In Sicily

After Cumae, the Chalcidians founded Naxos, Leontini, and Catania, and then, in order to dominate the straits, Zancle and (on the mainland) Rhegium; the Megareans established their settlements at Megara Hyblaea (ca. 750) and later at Selinus (ca. 650); the Corinthians installed themselves at Syracuse (ca. 733); and the Rhodians and Cretans at Gela and Acragas (Agrigentum).

In southern Italy

It was mainly the Achaeans, the Laconians, and the Locrians who settled at Sybaris (ca. 750), Croton, Metapontum, Siris, Tarentum (ca. 706), and Locri (ca. 673).

At first brutally repressed by the invaders, the indigenous populations, who in some places simply coexisted and in others actively cooperated with the settlers, were all more or less affected by the phenomenon known today as acculturation. Archaeologists and historians study it through monuments, sculptures, paintings, and especially pottery, emphasizing now the work's originality, now its fidelity to Greek models.

The Greek influence did not affect only the coastal areas and, to a lesser degree, the hinterland, where the Chalcidians, for instance, must have introduced the culture of the olive tree into central Italy. It also touched Rome. It has been remarked that the traditional date of Rome's founding (754/753 BC) matched to within a few years the date given for the settlement of the Achaeans in Sybaris (750), and that the end of the royal epoch in Rome coincided, still according to tradition, with the fall of Sybaris (510 BC). Was that chance?

What is certain is that the Greeks of Magna Graecia, Sicily, and even the Greek mainland traded with Rome as early as the seventh century: the findings of proto-Corinthian, and then Corinthian pottery itself, in excavations on the Palatine, and in the Forum in particular, prove it. Certain too is the fact that, like the Etruscans, the Greeks were to have a profound influence on budding Roman culture. On its law and institutions and art, it goes without saying. But also on its religion. The discovery at Lavinium of a dedication in Greek to the Dioscuri has shown that at the end of the sixth century or beginning of the fifth, Tarentum or Locri, centers of the fervent worship of Castor and Pollux, had contacts in Latium, very close to Rome. But above all, Pythagoras stands out as an enduring spiritual influence. He emigrated from Samos to Croton in about 530 and died at Metapontum. He was regarded by Herodotus as the wisest and most learned of men, and his doctrine inspired the model government of Archytas at Tarentum in the first half of the fourth century, "the first and finest example of a philosopher in power." His influence spread throughout Italy and thus to Rome. As J. Carcopino remarked, "when there was an Italic consciousness, it was Pythagoreanized." With fine disregard for chronol-

ogy, it was said in Rome that Numa Pompilius, the second king of Rome, had been his disciple. At all events, Pythagoreanism, and later neo-Pythagoreanism, left their mark on Roman thinking, even in the era of the emperor Claudius (AD 41–54), if one can date to this reign the curious subterranean edifice discovered in Rome, known as the Pythagorean basilica of the Porta Maggiore.

Just as Roman art owes much to that of Greece, either by direct contact and influence or through the channel of Magna Graecia, so the literature of Rome also inherited a great deal: the first epic and tragic poets came from Tarentum and Apulia (Livius Andronicus, Ennius, Pacuvius) or from Capua (Naevius); and Roman comedy was invented by Epicharmus, a Sicilian.

Rome was thus born in an Italy whose peoples had complex origins, and amid populations that were very mixed, but dominated by two advanced civilizations, Etruscan and Greek.