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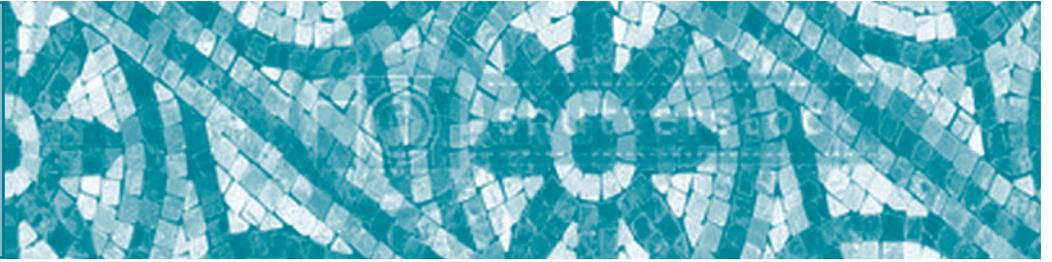
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FROM THE ORIGINS TO THE EMPIRE

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ITALY BEFORE ROME

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In the middle of the eighth century BCE, the time traditionally considered as the foundation date of Rome, Italy was a patchwork of peoples, some long settled, others still on the move. Among these peoples, two became established and rapidly dominated the north and south of the peninsula: the Etruscans and the Greeks. From early on, both peoples influenced deeply the budding township that later became Rome, the center of a Mediterranean empire. With the Phoenicians who set up their trading posts and the Greeks who established colonies, the East gained predominance in the western half of the Mediterranean basin.

1.1 The Peoples of Prehistoric Italy

Several elements survive from the pre-Indo-European, Mediterranean inhabitants of Italy, who were mainly aboriginals and immigrants from overseas. The Ligures were primitive mountain-dwellers, settled north of Etruria on the shores of the Gulf of Genoa and in the Maritime Alps. The Sicani were Sicilian aboriginals who had been pushed back to the south-western part of the island (around Gela and Agrigentum) by the Siculi. These had come from the Italian peninsula in the thirteenth or eleventh century BCE. According to other traditions, however, the Sicani and the Siculi were closely related or even identical peoples. Most historians agree that 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 “toe” of the peninsula, modern Calabria, was called *Italia*). These names were given to the indigenous populations of southern Italy by Greek authors, who regarded them all as *Pelasgi* (a name given by Greek historians to the prehistoric inhabitants of Greece). Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who wrote *Roman Antiquities* in Greek, claimed that the Italians were Greek in origin, an obviously incorrect generalization.

A pre-Indo-European substratum therefore existed, but it was not homogeneous, despite traces of a linguistic community. Some historians hold that these peoples (Pelasgi, Ligures, Siculi, Oenotri, etc.), who, according to the epic poet Virgil, were at the origin of primitive Rome, boil down to a single unity tracing to Arcadia, in the central Peloponnese. In his epic poem the *Aeneid*, Virgil traces the beginnings of Rome to an Arcadian foundation. Although such legends and literary fictions are neither factual nor accurate, they still reflect historical events and developments, as well as the social and cultural responses to these processes. The Arcadians certainly played an effective role in the colonization of southern Italy, from where the Arcadian legends reached Latium.

Following the Indo-European invasions into the greater part of Europe, Iran, and India (in the second millennium), new transalpine peoples came to settle in Italy, often overlaying older, indigenous strata. These can be roughly categorized into the following groups:

- The Veneti in the region of the Po delta. Of Illyrian origin, according to the fifth-century BCE Greek historian Herodotus, they maintained close relations with the coastal regions of the western Adriatic. Inscriptions from this area document the use of an archaic Indo-European language.
- The Celtic populations (Insubres, Cenomani, Boii, Lingones, and Senones). These infiltrated massively from the north-west, between the sixth and fourth centuries. They dominated the Po valley so greatly that, for centuries, Romans

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Map 1.1 Italy in the eighth century BCE: the Italic peoples

called this area Cisalpine Gaul (“Gaul on this side of the Alps”). Their influence and culture spread as far as Etruscan Felsina (Bologna), which became a gateway from the Po valley to Etruria (modern Tuscany).

- 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 seven bronze plaques found near Iguvium (modern Gubbio), which provide a key to their rituals and divinities.
- The Piceni followed the Umbri on the same coast and settled in the region of Ancona.

- 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.
- On the Adriatic coast to the south were the Frentani, the Apuli, and, around Tarentum, the Iapygians or Messapians, whose Illyrian origin, attributed to them by the early authors, is indicated by a study of the names of both places and peoples.
- On the western coast to the south were the Lucani and Bruttii, who overlay the indigenous strata of 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 difficult to access. This coast is linked to the hinterland by the Tiber, a navigable river which 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 Indo-European peoples who had migrated to the peninsula. Excavations of the burial sites of Lavinium and Antium have revealed hut-shaped cinerary urns, dating between 1000 and 875 BCE. Similar objects have been found in the pit tombs on the site of the Roman Forum. The rite of body burial only gradually replaced cremation. Archaeological findings in the small towns of Latium suggest the primacy of Alba over Rome, which is also attested by literary sources.
- To the north, beyond the Tiber, stretched the land of the Etrusci (or Tusci), whom the Greeks called *Tyrrhenoi*. The origin of this people remains mysterious and controversial. Did they come from the north or the east? (The land of Urartu, modern Armenia, has been suggested as a place of origin, on the basis of the same cauldrons with griffons’ heads which have been found there as in Etruria). Or were they aboriginals who integrated various cultural influences? Perhaps 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, the Tusci had become strongly established in Etruria, and their sphere of influence extended beyond the River Silarus (Sele) in the Salerno region in Campania. In fact, Etruscan inscriptions found in Volturnum (Capua) and Pompeii suggest their colonization of that region. Their influence to the north, as far as the Po valley, is suggested by abundant evidence of their culture and their creation of Etruscan towns such as Felsina and Melpum (Milan).

1.2 The Cultures of Prehistoric Italy

The cultures and way of life in early Italy were less varied than the peoples themselves. Except in the Apennines, where primitive mountain-dwellers lived,

livestock breeding and agriculture developed better means of survival than the older practices of hunting and fishing. The seasonal movement of livestock into higher or lower plains for pasturing became a central rural activity. This was due to the climate and soil of Italy, one sixth of which is mountainous and grassland. This practice either predominated or, as in Tuscany and central Italy, complemented agriculture. There, in the spring, the flocks gave place to crops. From Latium the flocks moved annually toward rich Umbria. This movement of people and animals was followed by trade between the two regions, which was aided by the easy transportation through the Tiber. Trade relationships, in turn, precipitated conflicts between the two regions.

On the other hand, there was a wide variety of languages, some of which show marked affinities among them. Mostly 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* (king), *flamen* (priest), *pater* (father), *mater* (mother).

Closely akin to Latin is Faliscan. Venetan is known from inscriptions on votive stone slabs (*stelae*) found in the town of Este in the Veneto region. Umbrian is attested by the bronze tablets from Iguvium; 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.

Ligurian stood outside these Indo-European languages, but borrowed elements from them. There was also Messapian or Iapygian, which is connected to Illyrian. And there was also, of course, Etruscan, to which we will turn below.

dictator: Magistrate appointed legally with full powers, but for a specified period (less than six months) and in order to accomplish a precise task, when grave danger threatened the state.

fasces: A bundle of rods bound round an axe. Carried by the lictors accompanying the magistrates *cum imperio* (senior magistrates with civil and military powers).

praetor: Senior magistrate specially responsible for justice. Performed some of the functions of the consuls in their absence.

Etruscan culture

Among this mix of cultures in the Italy in the eighth century BCE, Etruscan culture stands out by virtue of its progress and artistic brilliance. First, it was an urban civilization. In an Italy of villages, Etruria alone had towns. These were ritually founded and endowed with enclosing walls, gates, and temples built in stone. These features were later adopted by Romans in the development of their own towns. Etruria was composed roughly of a federation of 12 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 Servius Tullius, whose original name was allegedly Mastarna. 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 (*zilath*). This practice too was adopted by the Romans, and the Roman officers known as **praetors** perhaps correspond broadly to these ancient Etruscan magistracies. Certainly, 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* (wealthy land-owners who held power in the cities), until the rural plebeians forced their way in. Below was an immense class of slaves (though they could be emancipated and, once freed, could join the followers of the great men).

Moreover, the Etruscan civilization was materially and technically advanced, unlike those of other areas in Italy. Thanks to an advanced knowledge of hydraulics, the Etruscans practiced drainage and irrigation. Furthermore, skilled craftsmen, familiar with Greek techniques, constructed for the Etruscans shafts and tunnels to exploit the deposits of tin, copper, and iron which abounded in Etruria. Together with the iron from the island of Elba, these Etruscan minerals were widely traded. Among their most remarkable products were arms, tools, and domestic furnishings in bronze and iron (mainly mirrors and small chests), and pottery showing high levels of ceramic technique, such as *impasto* (thickly laid paint) and *bucchero nero* (black luster).

The Etruscans enjoyed an unchallenged primacy in three fields, the best known and most enigmatic of which was religion. The Etruscan religion was a revealed religion, and 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. They prescribed the rules concerning rituals and 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*). They also provided the knowledge necessary to conduct a person into the next world (*libri acheruntici*). The Etruscan religion was highly ritualistic, as indicated by the bronze liver of Placentia (Piacenza). This artifact features an image of the sky marked out in compartments bearing the names of the gods, and was used as a reference for examining the livers of animals offered to the gods. The Etruscans formed a pantheon similar to that of the Greeks: a leading Triad (Tinia = Jupiter, Uni = Juno, Menrva = Minerva) was venerated in tripartite temples (as the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus later in Rome). This was followed by deities roughly corresponding to the Greek Olympians but infused with elements of Italian animism and local folklore: 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.

In their conception of the after-life, the Etruscans were influenced by 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 (related to 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 considered to be related to the gladiatorial fights, as we shall see below). Hence there are scenes of funerary combat on the frescos of Etruscan tombs.

Plate I.1 Liver of Piacenza: bronze model of a liver of a sheep, made in Etruria and used for divination. The concave surface features a complex combination of principles of cosmology, hepatoscopy, and religious mythology, and it is our only source for several obscure divinities of the Etruscan pantheon. Third to second century BCE. Museo Civico, Piacenza. [akg-images/Bildarchiv Steffens](#)



Etruscan art was also sophisticated and highly influenced by Hellenism, which it introduced into central Italy. That influence appears particularly in:

- Sculpture of statues (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.

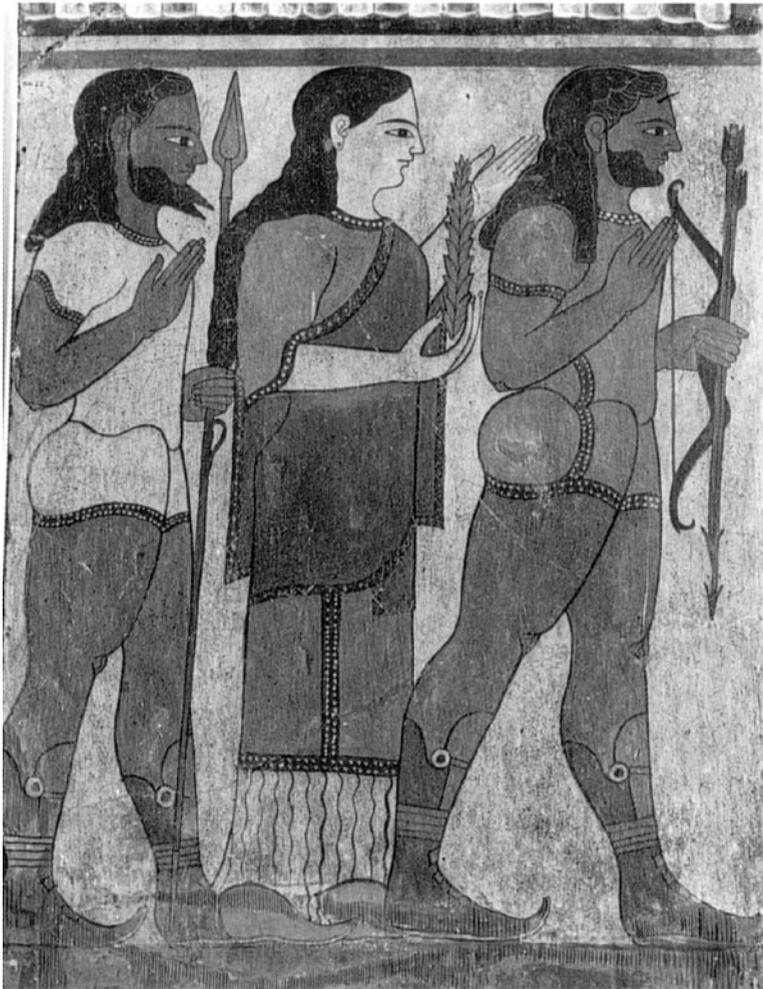


Plate I.2 Etruscan tomb painting: Ceres, the goddess of grain, with armed attendants. Sixth century BCE. C.M. Dixon

- Painting, known particularly through the frescos in tombs, notably at Tarquinii.
- Pottery: alongside the Greek vases, mainly Attic, revealed in the thousands by the necropoleis, elegant native pottery developed. Greek vases were both imported and produced locally, for example the seventh-century water pots 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

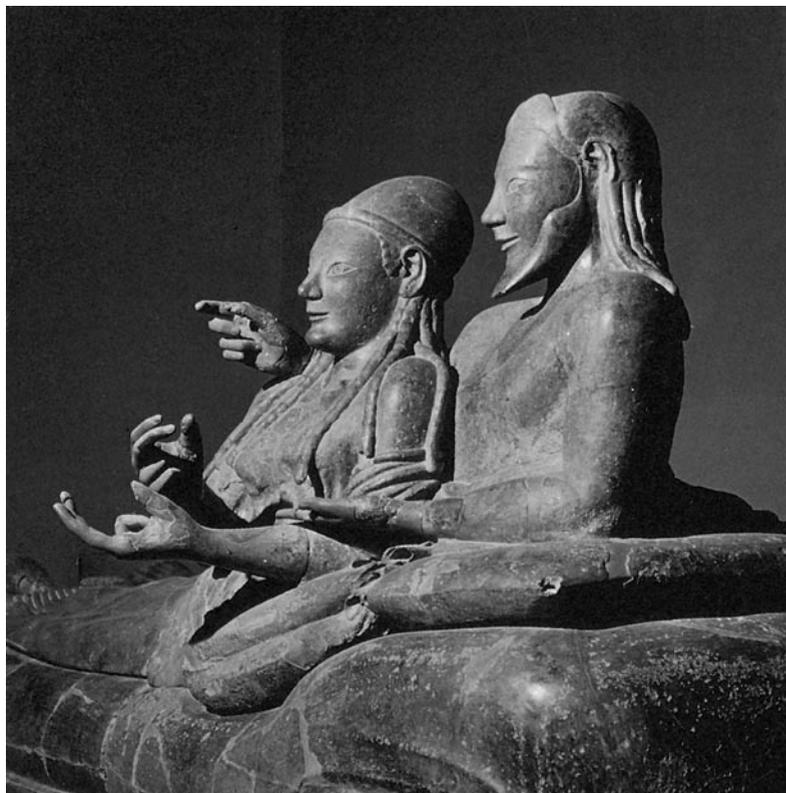


Plate I.3 Etruscan terra-cotta sarcophagus: husband and wife reclining on a couch. Caere (Cerveteri), sixth century BCE. C.M. Dixon

tripartite cella on a podium, and architectural decoration in polychrome terra-cotta); 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) feature rich furnishings (gold, ivory, vases).

The Etruscan language, which bears, naturally enough, the traces of borrowings from Greek and Italic dialects, is not considered to be an Indo-European tongue – linguistic connections have been explored with Basque, Caucasian, and (mainly) pre-Hellenic dialects. It is known to us through some 10,000 inscriptions, unfortunately for the most part very short, late-period epitaphs, which do not allow for much progress in our knowledge of the language. The Pyrgi inscriptions (bilingual golden tablets, in Etruscan and Punic) have not cast as much light on the Etruscan language as was hoped.

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



Plate I.4 Fresco from tomb in Caere (Cerveteri): the Etruscan god Turms carrying off the soul of a deceased woman. His wings and sandals correspond to the garb of Greek Hermes (Mercury), messenger of the gods and usher of souls into the Underworld. Sixth century BCE. Louvre museum, Paris. (C) RMN/Hervé Lewandowski

Plate I.5 Pyrgi Tablets. These three golden leaves record a diplomatic exchange between an Etruscan and a Tyrian king, in both Phoenician and Etruscan. The bilingual inscription provides evidence of Phoenician and Punic influence in Italy, and has cast some light on the mysteries of Etruscan theology and language. Late sixth century BCE. National Etruscan Museum, Rome

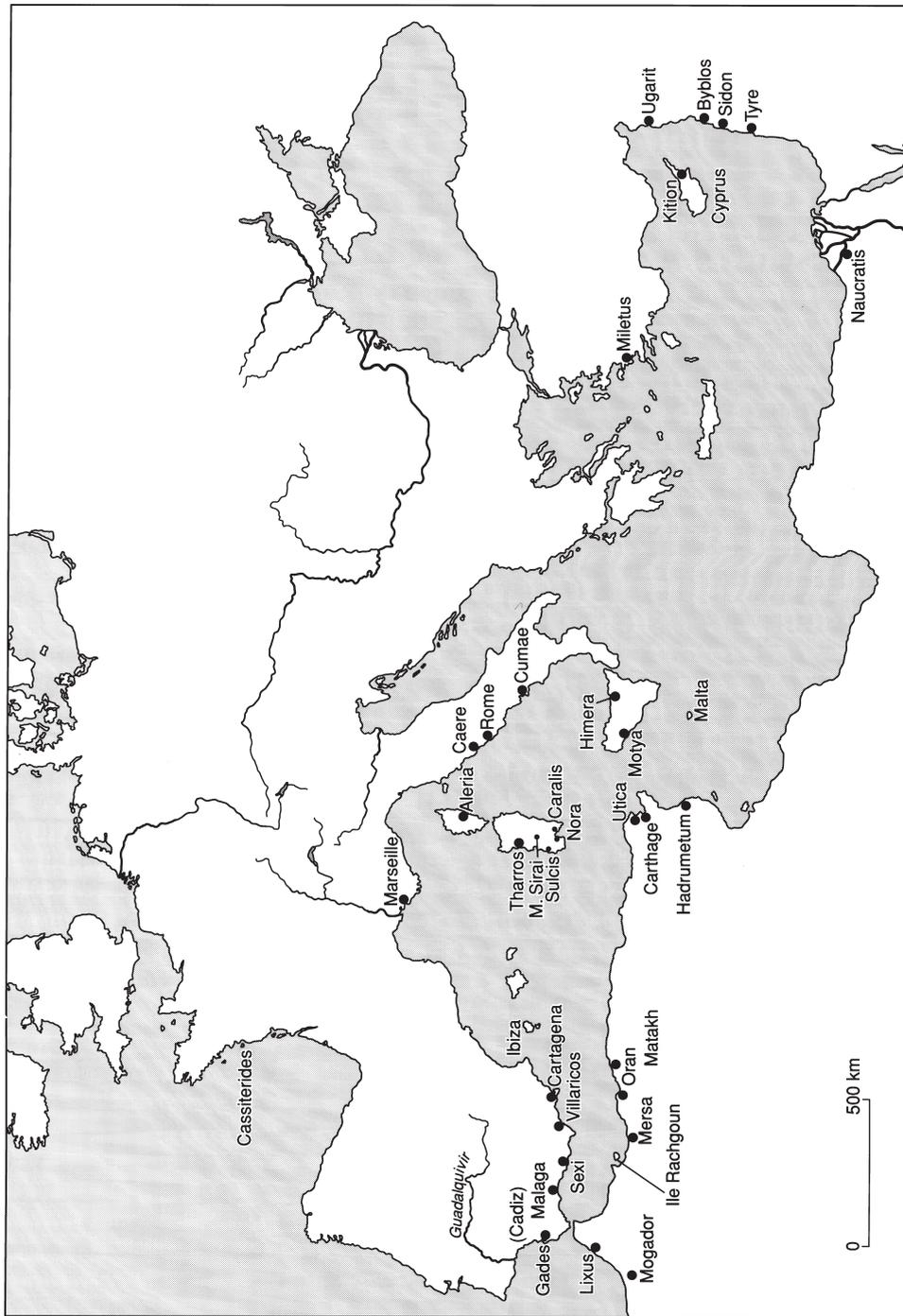


1.3 The East's Influence on the West

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 indicate the strength of the eastern expansion and influence in the western Mediterranean.

Phoenician settlement and culture

At least as early as the eleventh century BCE, Phoenician navigators from Tyre and Sidon had reconnoitered the African and Iberian coasts. The costly silver and ivory objects recovered from the great tombs of Etruria were actually imported from Phoenicia. Additionally, objects manufactured in Italy follow on Phoenician models and ranges of images borrowed from the Middle East. These artifacts reveal clearly an eastern influence on Etruscan civilization in the eighth–seventh centuries. And the presence of Phoenician traders is attested not only in Sicily, Sardinia, and Malta, but in the eighth–seventh centuries in Rome itself, where a colony of Tyrians 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,



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

has been linked with the presence of Tyrian merchants and the worship of the Tyrian Baal-Melqart.

The Greeks in Italy and Sicily

The Greek colonization in the West is better known than that of the Phoenicians. Greek migrations, mainly in southern Italy and Sicily, are confirmed by both writings and archaeological findings. The Greek influence on the people of the Italian peninsula constituted one of the major events in the history of the Mediterranean in the first millennium BCE.

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 (c.770), followed by Ischia (c.740; see the so-called “Nestor’s cup” from Pithecusae). 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 (which the Greeks called *Trinacria*, “triangular”). The density of settlement was such that, in the second century BCE, the Greek historian Polybius used the name *Megale Hellas* (Great Greece) to define the Hellenized south of Italy, which was translated into Latin as *Magna Graecia*. 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 Sicilian straits, they founded Zancle and (on the mainland) Rhegium; the Megareans established their settlements at Megara Hyblaea (c.750) and later at Selinus (c.650); the Corinthians installed themselves at Syracuse (c.733); and the Rhodians and Cretans at Gela and Acragas (Agrigento).

In southern Italy

It was mainly the Achaeans, the Laconians, and the Locrians who settled at Sybaris (c.750), Croton, Metapontum, Siris, Tarentum (c.706), and Locri (c.673). The indigenous populations, who in some places simply coexisted and in others actively cooperated with the Greek settlers, were all more or less affected and acculturated by them, even as they in turn influenced the newcomers with their own practices. Archaeologists and historians study this interaction between the two cultures through monuments, sculptures, paintings, and especially pottery, emphasizing the degree of the work’s “native” characteristics and its imitation of Greek models.

The Greek influence spread through the coastal areas to the hinterland, where the Chalcidians, for instance, must have introduced the culture of the olive tree



Map I.3 Greek colonization (from J. Heurgon, *Rome et la Méditerranée occidentale*, PUF, 1980)

into central Italy. Eventually it touched Rome, and various traditional tales reflect a Roman tendency to parallel, and emulate, Greek history. For example, the traditional date of Rome's founding (754/753 BCE) roughly coincides with the date given for the settlement of the Achaeans in Sybaris (750). Similarly, the chronology for the expulsion of the last Etruscan king from Rome (509 BCE) coincides with the fall of Sybaris, the wealthiest city in Magna Graecia, and the victory of Harmodius and Aristogeiton over the Pisistratid tyrants of Athens.

These symbolic connections suggest clearly an interaction between the Romans and the Greeks of Magna Graecia, Sicily, and even the Greek mainland, as early as the seventh century. Proto-Corinthian and then Corinthian pottery found on the Palatine, and in the Forum in particular, prove these strong ties. The Greeks, like the Etruscans, had a profound influence on budding Roman culture, on its law, institutions, art, and religion. The discovery at Lavinium of a dedication to the Dioscuri, in Greek, demonstrates that Tarentum or Locri (centers of the worship of Castor and Pollux) had contacts in Latium, very close to Rome, already at the end of the sixth century or beginning of the fifth. The philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras stands out for his 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 (428–347 BCE), who aimed to follow the Platonic doctrine of a “philosopher in power.” Pythagoras’ influence quickly spread throughout Italy and thus to Rome. His popularity is suggested by the fact that Numa Pompilius, the second king of Rome, was said to have been Pythagoras’ disciple, despite the chronological impossibility (discussed by Plutarch in his *Life of Numa*). At all events, Pythagoreanism, and later neo-Pythagoreanism, left their mark on Roman thinking.

In addition to art, Roman literature also owes much to that of Greece, either by direct contact or through the channel of Magna Graecia: 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.