On the Edge of History: How the Modern Reception of Etruscans and Celts has Been Shaped Through a Roman Reality

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As the Italian archaeologist Massimo Pallottino would have it, 'In many of its aspects, we are forced to regard and study the civilization of Etruria as if it were a prehistoric civilization although it belongs fully to historical times'.[1] It is hard to imagine anyone making a similar remark about the Etruscans' contemporaries either in the Po Valley or north of the Alps. These two areas, which seem in the material record to share much in common, have been studied in different ways within distinct sub-disciplines of archaeology. As is suggested by Pallottino's words, there is a qualitative difference in how historic and prehistoric cultures are understood and investigated. Similarly, I argue, there is a notable difference in what is expected of the achievements of these cultures. Much of this ties into the primacy given to written sources, particularly those from Greece and Rome. This paper examines the images these sources have produced of two of Rome's near neighbours, the Etruscans and the Celts, and what they tell us about the necessities of Roman politics.

Sources

Some of the most comprehensive written sources we have for these cultures are not Latin but Greek.[2] Classical Greece was home to an ethnographic tradition that attempted to characterise alien societies in a way that Rome, at least in the early days, did not. Central to much of this Greek work was the underlying assumption of the difference between Greek and Barbarian. This was a neat reflection of a well-established and recognised pattern of binary oppositions common in Greek philosophy, such as left and right, evil and good, crooked and straight.[3] This system can clearly be seen at the heart of many Greek ethnographies in which Greek and non-Greek customs were contrasted[4]. In turn, our Roman sources seem to pick up many of the same ideas and tropes deployed in Greek literature. For example, many aspects of Roman descriptions of Etruscans, from their wealth and luxurious lifestyles, their 'decadent softness',[5] their perceived cowardice and their apparent eastern origins, can all be found in earlier Greek accounts. The reason for these similarities has been partly attributed to Rome's desire to ingratiate itself with the Greek cities of southern Italy and, later, with the Greeks further east. By defining themselves as diametrically opposed to their neighbours, much as the Greeks did, Rome created an allusion to cultural similarity.

Whilst Roman sources, like those of the Greeks, are clearly defined by self against other, they take on a far more overtly political aspect. Many of the best known Roman authors date back to the late republic or draw directly on sources from that time. With the expansion of citizenship and the crystallisation of the idea of Italia in this period, regional identities took on a new significance, becoming a stick with which to beat those in high office[6], or an argument for or against extending the franchise to particular groups.[7] Beyond this, it is worth remembering that much of Roman history has its origins in family history, passed down from generation to generation and recorded with the intent of glorifying ancestors, reflecting that glory onto present generations, and legitimising claims to positions of authority and power. Still further, at a communal level, these histories served to explain Rome's advantaged position within Italy and beyond, and why it had rightfully risen to a position of pre-eminence. The expansion of Roman hegemony over the peninsula led to the creation of the belief that Rome was a special case within Italy, strongly stressing the idea that Rome was the only true city in the region.[8] This played a key role in how Rome defined both itself and the other peoples it encountered.

The Etruscans

Concerning the Etruscans, the general picture within Latin sources is somewhat ambivalent. Although considered soft and decadent, they were

1. M. Pallottino, *The Etruscans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p.153
2. J.H.C. Williams, *Beyond the Rubicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.22-35
3. P. Cartledge, *The Greeks: A Portrait of Self and Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.14
4. Cartledge 1993, p.71
5. M.B. Bittarello, 'The Construction of Etruscan 'Otherness' in Latin Literature', in *Greece and Rome* 56:2 (2009), p.212
6. Bittarello 2009, pp.219-30
7. Williams 2001, p.126
8. E. Dench, *From Barbarians to New Men: Greek, Roman, and Modern Perceptions of Peoples from the Central Apennines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp.74-5

Etruria, Gaul and their relationship to Rome. Exact boundaries of Gallia are somewhat arbitrary and were fluid over time to fit Roman ideas of Italy. Although Etruria is shown here as a region bounded by the rivers Tiber and Arno, Etruscan 'Influence', material culture and colonies stretch far beyond these borders including a large amount of activity in the Po Valley.

generally respected for, among other things, their skill as augurs and diviners. They appear in Virgil's *Aeneid*, fighting mainly with the bow,[9] suggesting both their rumoured oriental origins and an association with hunting. Unlike the Romans, they are not real soldiers but hunters, more closely associated with the predatory beasts of the forest than their morally upright neighbours. Simultaneously, they are noted for their love of luxury and effeminacy; they are cowards, afraid of a good fight, who, according to Livy, were known to have attempted to hire Gauls to fight the Romans for them. Notable politicians of the late republic and early empire, such as Augustus' close adviser Maecenas, were of Etruscan origin and were tarred with the twin brushes of softness and untrustworthiness.[10] Propaganda against such figures probably did much to reinforce these stereotypes. In comparison to the Etruscan morality tale of urban excess, the Sabines and other Latin peoples besides the Romans are often presented as shining examples of rural Italic virtue.[11] They in turn, it should be noted, are alternatively portrayed as simple country bumpkin types next to the more civilized Romans. As ever, 'varying cultural needs produce diverging

cultural representations'.[12]

Being on Rome's immediate borders, the Etruscans played an important part in Roman mythology from its very beginnings. Yet, over time they were increasingly side-lined, as can be seen in the changing role of the Etruscan settlement of Caere in the Gallic sack of Rome.[13] As well as Etruscans being implicated in numerous ways for bringing Gauls to the gates of Rome, Caere's role in ensuring Rome's survival is diminished over time. Early accounts portray Caere as the refuge to which the vestal virgins fled, enabling Roman ritual practice to continue uninterrupted. It also provided key military support for the final defeat of the Gauls. In later versions, however, Caere plays a decreasing role, and is eventually largely written out of the story. A powerful, self-important Rome did not need to be saved by its by now weak Etruscan neighbour of negligible importance.

The Celts
One key element that could not be written out of the tale of the sack of Rome was the Gauls: a group who would play a continuously important role in the Roman psyche. The exact composition of this group is actually quite hard to pin down. 'Celt' or 'Gaul' are terms generally applied more or less interchangeably, referring to peoples identified in the ancient sources as Keltoi, Galatai or Galli.[14]

9. Bittarello 2009, pp.214-6
10. Bittarello 2009, pp. 220-3
11. E. Dench, 'Sacred Springs to the Social War: Myths of Origin and Questions of Identity in the Central Apennines' in T. Cornell & K. Lomas (eds). *Les Gender and Ethnicity in Ancient Italy* (London: Accordia Research Institute, 1997) pp.43-51

12. Bittarello 2009, p.212
13. Williams 2001, p.148
14. Williams 2001, pp.6-7

Ancient authors appeared to have assumed, at a relatively early stage, that the Keltoi or Galatai of the Greek works were the same as the Galli encountered by the Romans. This assumption was quite an obvious one to make, given the prevailing model of how the peoples of the world were organised. As far as the Greeks were concerned, only two groups of people existed on the northern edge of their known world: Scythians to the north and Keltoi to the west. This model was largely adopted by the Romans, and although in the late republic a third category was recognised, which expanded the ethnographic map to include Galli/Keltoi in the northwest, Germans in the north and Scythians in the northeast, it remained largely stable.[15]

As already mentioned, the key event in the formation of the Roman image of the Gaul was the sack of Rome, traditionally dated to 390 BC, the recovery from which in many ways formed a new foundation myth for the city. Many of the details of the sack have clearly shifted and been embellished over time, the story gaining in symbolic importance. Of all the barbarian peoples, Gauls were always to hold a special position of fear in Rome. Although not sharing the physical softness of the Etruscans, Gauls were typified by a weakness of character; a fickleness that made them thoroughly untrustworthy. Debates in the first century BC over exactly where the northern border of Italy should be drawn and whether or not to give the people of the Po Valley (essentially Gallic peoples) Roman citizenship, took on a strong political flavour in which the moral fibre of the proposed citizenry played an important role.[16] Much like the case of the Roman politicians of Etruscan origin, old stereotypes were re-appropriated and reinforced through political necessity.

Origins
How then did these distinctions affect our enduring image of these past societies and how we approach them? Firstly, I wish to look at the question of origins. Although not in vogue in archaeological circles, the issue of origins has been of great significance in studies of the Etruscans.[17] Both the non-Indo-European character of the Etruscan language, and the existence of literary sources claiming the Etruscans originated somewhere

in the east, have supported this.[18] The problem here is that these features have been noted as if they are somehow exceptional to the Etruscans. There are other ancient languages in the area that also do not fit the Indo-European family, such as Raetic.[19] The Etruscans are even less exceptional in potentially possessing an origin myth outside of Italy. Samnite myths claim origins from an early Spartan colony[20], whilst the Venetii of the northern Adriatic coast and the Romans themselves claim origins from ancient Troy.[21] Etruscan otherness is stressed in order to further myths of Roman exceptionalism within Italy. Seemingly too close to Rome, the Etruscans are somehow painted as foreign interlopers, whilst Rome remains a sole example of a home grown Italian city.

Tales of Etruscan origins in the east also fit neatly with their stereotyped image, featuring many of the tropes more commonly associated with the eastern barbarian than with those of the west or north. They are very much the Easterners of the West. This all draws on the celebrated mystery of the Etruscans. The image of these masters of strange cultish ritual, speaking an exotic impenetrable language, is further reinforced by origins shrouded in the orient, whilst their many elaborate and well preserved necropoleis suggest a morbid obsession with death.[22]

The origin of the Gauls of the Po Valley has also been a topic of debate. Roman history contains several stories of Gauls invading northern Italy, and there is some discussion over when exactly this occurred and whether this constituted one invasion or numerous waves. Once again, a key uniting theme is that the people in question came from outside of Italy, in this case having moved from the far side of the Alps. Evidence for these migrations has been sought in the archaeological record and indeed potentially found, with the appearance of material culture in the Po Valley that correlates closely with that found north of the

15. G. Woolf, 'Saving the Barbarian' in E.S. Gruen (ed), *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Los Angeles: Getty, 2011), p.255
16. Williams 2001, pp.109-110
17. G. Barker & T. Rasmussen, *The Etruscans* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp.43-4

18. M.E. Moser, 'The Origins of the Etruscans: New Evidence for an Old Question' in J.F. Hall, *Etruscan Italy: Etruscan Influences on the Civilizations of Italy from Antiquity to the Modern Era* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1996), p.29
19. J. Penny, 'The Etruscan Language and its Italic Context' in J. Swaddling and P. Perkins (eds). *Etruscan by Definition* (London: British Museum Press, 2009), p.90
20. Dench 1995, pp.53-61
21. R. Laurence, 'Territory, Ethnonyms and Geography: The Construction of Identity in Roman Italy' in R. Laurence & J. Berry (eds). *Cultural Identity in the Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 104-5
22. The dominance of the necropoleis in archaeological dialogues has as much to do with differential survival as the focus of Etruscan society. See G. Barker and T. Rasmussen, *The Etruscans* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p.232

Alps.[23] Interestingly though, this new material, representative of the La Tène culture of Celtic Europe, appears south of the Alps at about the same time as its appearance north of the Alps. New practices also seem to coexist with a number of older traditions of the area, such as mortuary custom. This confuses the picture and makes the large scale invasion hypothesis hard to support. It is worth asking why the issue of Gallic migration was important to Roman writers, particularly those of the first century BC. With the politically significant question of the extension of the franchise to populations north of the Apennines, the right of the existing Gallic inhabitants to reside on that land, not to mention the land's status as part of Italy, became increasingly important issues.

Urbanism

Similarly, the question of urbanism bears closely on issues of legitimate occupation of the Po Valley. We are used to thinking of the Etruscans as an urban people. For example, Roman sources tell us that the ritual for the foundation of new Roman colonies was based upon Etruscan rites.[24] The existence of Gallic towns, on the other hand, seems to have somewhat confused Roman historians. Despite noting particular occasions of Gallic foundations, there is a general denial that the Gauls built any towns at all. The non-urban nature of the Gauls was a key element of the Roman justification for expansion into the Po Valley. The Etruscans had built cities there, but were too decadent to defend themselves when the Gauls invaded over the Alps. In turn, the Gauls had destroyed what civilisation they found and squandered the potential of the land, proving themselves equally unworthy of such prime fertile territory.[25] Only the Romans could bring civilization to the land, and also have the strength to hold on to it. As a result, in Etruria a relatively small number of urban or proto-urban sites are seen as indicative of the nature of its society. With their town building credentials not in doubt, we expect to identify Etruscan settlement sites as urban. Conversely, we are told by the Romans that the Gauls did not dwell in cities; in fact, they destroyed the Etruscan cities of the Po plain when they invaded northern Italy.[26] For this reason, the Celtic peoples to the north of the Roman world are rarely considered to dwell in urban or even proto-urban settlements.

Demonstrably, Roman attitudes have had a direct impact upon the manner in which the archaeology of these two areas is characterised.

The question of what makes a settlement site 'urban' has not been extensively problematized.[27] Etruscan central places tend to lack many of the traits used to classify towns elsewhere in the classical world. There is very little in the way of convincing evidence of public spaces within the walls, no definite agora or forum as we would expect in a Greek or Roman town.[28] What characteristically urban features they do possess, they seem to share with other major Celtic settlement sites such as the Heuneburg in Baden-Württemberg, southern Germany. Concepts of urban and rural are problematic in their application to these societies. There is an assumption things are either done the Roman way or not at all.

Roman Identities?

The question that has so far gone unasked is: in the period before Roman expansion, did these peoples even consider themselves as single ethnic groups with a shared identity? The chances are, particularly in the case of the Celts, that this was not the case. The picture created is one of Romans, Italians, non-Italians and how they came to find their place within an expanding Roman Empire. All of these groups seemingly gained form, firstly in the construction of Roman identity, and subsequently in the creation of Italia as a distinct if never entirely bounded concept. Although the stereotypes created are rarely entirely negative, they present the other ethnic group as something different, something that cannot be fully comprehended, that can never be understood and never truly be trusted. They continue to shape the way we think of these peoples, and have significantly influenced our vocabulary in defining them and our agendas in researching them. This is the legacy of Rome's own self-mythologizing historic tradition, and in turn the advantaged position of Roman literature within modern western society.[29]

23. R. Häussler, 'At the Margins of Italy: Celts and Ligurians in North-West Italy' in G. Bradley et al (eds), A*ncient Italy: Regions without Boundaries* (Exeter: Exeter University Press 2007), pp.53-56
24. A. Böethius & J.B. Ward-Perkins, *Etruscan and Roman Architecture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970)
25. Williams 2001, pp.80-1
26. Williams 2001, pp.100-13

27. B. Trigger, 'Determinants of Urban Growth in Pre-Industrial Societies' in P.J. Ucko et al, *Man, Settlement and Urbanism: Proceedings of a Meeting of the Research Seminar in Archaeology and Related Subjects Held at the Institute of Archaeology, London University* (London: Duckworth 1972) and R. Osborne, 'Urban Sprawl: What is Urbanization and Why Does it Matter?' in R. Osborne & B. Cunliffe (eds), *Mediterranean Urbanization 800-600 BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)
28. M. Bentz & C. Reusser, *Marzabotto: Planstadt der Etrusker* (Mainz am Rhein: von Zabern, 2008)
29. C. Stray, *Classics Transformed. Schools, Universities, and Society in England, 1830-1960* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998)

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