**The significance of the Etruscans**

"I can never succeed in understanding why Italians still fail to recognize the enormous contribution that the Etruscan civilization has made to our Western civilization. We keep on believing the teaching that the Greeks and above all the Romans are the peoples to whom the Western world owes its origins. All of this is considerably exaggerated and based on historical falsehoods. However, I have ascertained instead that it is the Etruscans, coming from the East, who are the true founders of our European culture, for both good and bad aspects. This truth continues to be understated and at times hindered by various Italian historians while it has been being recognized for numerous decades by the majority of the historians of the whole world. Etruscology is now a subject of enormous interest all over the world and a lot of falsehoods and commonly held beliefs are crumbling because they were used to discredit a people for appropriating of their worth’s. In the past centuries first the powerful and unculturated Rome h as falsified its own origins and has ignored the legacy of the defeated Etruscan civilization, then the first Christian emperors have completed the work with their edicts. Subsequently on the ruins of the empire, the Pontifices of the new religion appropriated many ancient insignias of the Orient handed down to the Romans from Etruscan leaders and priests. For example the purple of the Lucumones became the color of the cardinal, the Etruscan priest's Littus became the Pastoral one of the Bishops. The solemn ceremonies of the new religion are a reproduction of the Etruscan religious ceremonies. The ancient former Etruscan cities became the first Episcopal centers (Volterra, Vulci, Orvieto, etc). The longest existing Etruscan text is a calendar containing 12 columns with the religious instructions for every day.

Also the figurative Christian patrimony retraces the images found again in the Etruscan tombs. The winged figures of the Etruscans return in the Christian figures of the angels and Satan. On top of the ancient Etruscan temples has been built the new churches which very probably still conceal in many things their walls. It is strange that Etruscologists have not considered this yet. Then first Rome, then above all the priestly hierarchy of the new Roman religion snatched the symbols of the Etruscan civilization but denied the so-called pagan origin of it all. As always happens rather in the history and in the life, slandering the legitimate owners and accusing them of various inequities. Unfortunately our culture has inherited the worse of the Etruscan religion as for example, the concept of infallibility, seconded by the Christian religion.

However as also happens at times in life, the truth is reborn. From accumulated evidence, one succeeds in gathering that the truth is quite different. The great civilizing inheritance of the Etruscans was for centuries abandoned, earths once rich with produce became uncultivated, shops of artisans and artists became empty, their advanced knowledge of metallurgy and of hydraulics was forgotten and Etruscan creative individuality was oppressed - fortunately not entirely. After centuries of cultural regression (I probably suspect due to the new religious Imperium) of hiding and of destruction of the sources of the Etruscan civilization there came the rebirth. In the ancient suburbs of the Appennines there remained the descendants of the Etruscans and the wonder contained in the tombs of their ancestors woke up again their native genome: the central part of the ancient world earth of the Etruscans, Tuscany, became the cradle of the Humanism and of the Renaissance. In these cities, for long generations Etruscan, characters such as Dante Leonardo, Brunelleschi, Giotto, Bernini, Michelangelo, etc. were born, and above all so many unknown artisans and artists to which the growth of our Western civilization is owed.

Life of an Etruscan

The internal walls of Etruscan tombs such as those at Cerveteri and Tarquinii still contain the remains of magnificent murals which give us a considerable insight into the Etruscan way of life. A commonly recurring theme is the banquet, which in the case of the Necropolis paintings, carried a double meaning. For the banquet was also an intrinsic part of the religious ceremony at funerals. After all the formal funeral ceremonies were complete, the relatives of the deceased were treated to a sumptuous banquet, at which the spirit of the departed was believed to attend.

In Etruscan daily life, the banquet was very much a status symbol, indicating to all and sundry that the hosts had "arrived" in the estimation of the Etruscan social elite. Certainly in the heyday of the Etruscan league, around the seventh century BCE a wide reaching trading network (the first EEC) had been well established with far flung parts of Europe. Etruscan bronzes have been found as far afield as Hassle in Sweden. Ships loaded with amphorae and the bounties of Etruscan mining and agriculture were traded throughout the Mediterranean and possibly into the Atlantic Ocean as far as Madeira. As a result of all this, life for the rich Etruscans was extremely pleasant.

Lavish receptions were laid on, in which the guests; men and women of high social standing, reclined on couches waited on by numerous servants, and were entertained by musicians and dancers swaying to the hypnotic but strident rhythms of music played by Etruscan virtuosos.

The tables were covered with elaborately embroidered table cloths, on to which the various dinner courses were arranged. The dishes included generous selections of fish such as Tuna, and meats such as hare, deer and birds (Wild boar was a particular favourite). Grapes were originally native to the Arabian peninsula, but widely grown by the beginning of the first millennium BCE. The Etruscans probably introduced grapes and wine to Italy around the 9th Century BCE.

There is no doubt that the Etruscan sea ports, or emporia were important international trading centers, and therefore of great economic and cultural significance for the Etruscans. Judging from the Greek and Phoenician sanctuaries found in Graviscae and Pyrgi respectively they were probably populated by mixed peoples, and attracted merchants and artisans from far afield. We have a historical example of such a trader in Demeratos of Corinth. Livy tells us that he sold Etruscan goods to the Greeks and Greek goods to the Etruscans, and that he brought with him a number of artists from Corinth. The presence of Proto-Corinthian and Corinthian ware in Caere and Tarquinia would appear to be consistent with this account.

Etruscan gold work was arguably unrivaled in the Mediterranean during the first millennium BCE. A considerable selection of Gold jewelry was found in the Regolini Galassi tomb, which was discovered in the 19th Century, surprisingly with little evidence of looting. Looting was all too common in Ancient days, and was even encouraged officially by Alaric the Goth when his armies overran Rome in the early 5th Century CE.

The above magnificent gold fibula was taken from the Regolini- Galassi Tomb, Cerveteri (Caere) and dates back to the 7th Century BCE. This to me is one of the finest examples of Etruscan goldsmith's art. This illustration does not do justice in revealing the fine work that went into such a piece. The precise technique of granulation was for a long time a forgotten art, and it was only rediscovered in the 20th Century by E Treskow.   
(A fibula is a kind of large ornamental safety pin used to fasten a robe)

These are very typical of so many Etruscan Frescoes which depicted figures vibrant with life, often dancing or playing musical instruments. They painted birds or animals on many of these intermingled with the human figures, which usually looked strong and healthy and full of the joy of life. The little birds and other figures from nature somehow do not seem out of place or look like mere decorations, but lended a natural harmony to the finished work.

The above sculpture (actually a hollow cinerary urn) comes from the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri, and is known as the *Sarcophagus dei Sposi*. It is currently exhibited in the Villa Giulia museum in Rome. The terra cotta sarcophagus lid with figures of a man and woman, presumably his wife reclining on a triclinium or dining couch presumably eating a meal or having a quiet moment after supper. Both figures are propped up on their left elbow with the man close behind the woman. Both faces share a secret, tender smile. A very similar sarcophagus to this was also found in Cerveteri. They are believed to be by the same artist and date to 520 - 530 BCE.

Many Greek and Roman authors including Theopompus of Chios and Plato referred to the Etruscans as immoral. During later Roman times, the word Etruscan was almost synonymous with prostitute, and Livy's histories moralise about the rape of Lucretia, where Roman women are seen as virtuous model wives in comparison to their liberated Etruscan counterparts. On this site we shall examine the evidence given by these sources and also from Necropolis art such as the "Tomb of the Bulls" in Tarquinia.

Tomb of the reliefs

The tomb consists of a single chamber, with shelves and hollows in the walls. The ceiling is supported by two pillars, with Aeolian capitals, on which are reproduced objects from domestic and military use through as well as animals (eg cats). The technique used sketching the object on the wall, and then using terracotta clay to create the objects some of which is done using stamps and moulds. All it has been then skillfully covered with vivid colors.

All around the walls runs a frieze of crews: helms, spears, shields, perhaps emphasizing the participation of the deceased in military campaigns. It should be emphasized that the tomb dates to the age of the wars with Rome, a little before end of the 4th Century BCE.

The importance of this tomb, beyond its beauty is for its testimony to the last period of independence of the Etruscan civilization, of the return to power of the aristocracy and perhaps the period that marked the end of the freedom for these proud people. It also highlights the equality of the sexes in Etruscan society, even in death.

Tomb of the leopards

The couple on the left hand cline appears to be engrossed in conversation without paying any attention to the others.   
  
The man on the right hand cline is offering a large egg to the woman. The egg is a symbol of life after death (cf. Easter eggs in the Christian tradition). All are wearing crowns of laurel for the festive occasion.

There is a great deal of symbolism in the frescos in the tomb, which is associated with the elaborate banquets which accompanied an Etruscan funeral.

Tomb of hunting and fishing

In a boat we notice four fishermen: one intent on rowing- the others fishing, perhaps with a net. From the water muticoloured dolphins and a seagull appears on the surface.

Bronzes

During ancient times, the Etruscans were undisputed masters of the art of bronze sculpture, and were praised for this art by writers Greek and Roman alike.

Athenaeus in his "Symposium" quotes a poem by Critias in saying "Etruscan cup of beaten gold is king, and any bronze whatever that adorns the house for any purpose". Again from Athenaeus, a character in a play by Pherecrates is quoted as saying "The lamp stand was Tyrrhenian... for manifold were the crafts among the Etruscans, since they were skilled and loving workmen"

Vitruvius in his famous work on Architecture refers to the superlative gilded bronze statues of the Etruscans, and Pliny the Elder writes "There are also Etruscan Statues dispersed in various parts of the world, which beyond any doubt were made in Etruria".

Even today we have some magnificent examples of Etruscan bronze work in the Capitoline she-wolf (Romulus and Remus were added in the 15th Century). This is the Lupa, which the symbol of Rome even to this day.

In Arezzo, another city symbol is the bronze Chimera, bursting with life, which can be seen in the local museum.

The names of the masters who made these sculptures are unknown, however what remains today is a sad remnant of the enormous treasury of Etruria, the El Dorado of the Ancient World. This was a treasury not only in terms of monetary worth, but in terms of the incalculable artistic value, most of which is now lost.

We read in Titus Livius that when the consul M Fulvius Flaccus overpowered the city of Volsinii, they despoiled it of all its precious treasures, its votive offerings and all other gifts. A long line of wagons packed with the plunder, including 2000 bronze statues set off for Rome, only to be melted down to be used to made Roman coins (aes grave) of bronze to assist with the war effort against Carthage. Metrodorus of Scepsis is reported (Pliny The Elder) to have reproached the Romans for plundering the city just for the sake of two thousand statues.

One of the most famous bronze working centers was the city of Vulci. Even into Roman days, the city remained an important centre for bronze ware, and drinking vessels, tripods with feet shaped like lions paws, and incense burners with dancers and Sileni were among the artworks emanating from that city.

During the peak of the Roman Empire, such cities as Clusium and Arretium were still producing excellent bronze ware, albeit in the Roman style. The statue of Aulus Metellus is but one example of later Etruscan bronze ware.