

The Etruscan Enigma

by: Phyllis Young Forsyth

The civilization of Rome was not created in a vacuum: long before the Romans came into prominence, a people called the Etruscans inhabited, and ruled, the northern part of the Italian peninsula. With their domain stretching from the Arno River in the north to the Tiber in the south, these mysterious people left an indelible mark on Roman politics, religion, culture and art. The Romans themselves later recognized the great influence the Etruscans had had over Rome: legend recorded that some of the early kings of that city were in fact Etruscans, not Latins.

Yet the Etruscans remain an enigma. Their language, though based on the Greek alphabet, is still unclassified; their ethnic origin is still a matter of debate, with some authorities arguing that the Etruscans were native to Italy, while others argue that they migrated to Italy from Asia Minor. All we can be sure of is that a kind of Etruscan nation existed in northern Italy by the 7th century BC. From that period on, powerful Etruscan city-states controlled extensive areas of land and co-operated with each other to bring most of Italy under Etruscan domination. One of these city-states, Caere, was so wealthy and influential that it maintained a special treasury building at the Greek sanctuary of Delphi.

At first, each city-state was governed by a king (called lauchme in the Etruscan language); this king served as chief commander in war, administrator of the laws, and high priest. The symbol of his power was the fascas -- the axe and bundle of rods which were later to be adopted by the Romans as their great symbol of the right to rule. As the lauchme passed through the streets of his city, heralds would go before him carrying these fascas.

The kingship was not fated to endure long in the Etruscan city-states: by the 5th century B.C., the king had been relieved of power by the nobles, who then established republics to be governed by a senate of aristocrats and by annually elected officials. There seem to have been three major offices to be filled by election: the zilath was the chief magistrate, but the purthne and the maru also exercised important civic functions.

Most of what we know today about the culture of these Etruscans is based on archaeological research. For example, the more important city-states of Etruria had extensive burial areas, where monumental tombs have been uncovered in recent years. In these tombs, or at least in those tombs which have not been plundered, many artifacts have been found which help us to reconstruct the life of these people.

One significant aspect of Etruscan culture to come to light in this manner is the high status of women in Etruria. Etruscan family life seems to have been less authoritarian than its Roman counterpart, and husband and wife appear to have been socially and legally equal. Good evidence comes from the fact that Etruscan children bore the names of both parents, not just that of the father. Moreover, Etruscan women would accompany their husbands to public festivities, and many seem to have been active in sports. What shocked the Greeks most about these Etruscan women, however, was that they sometimes wore see-through dresses!

Etruscan religion left a very clear mark on Rome: as it was important to understand the will of the gods, the Etruscans developed a most complex system of divination, including the examination of the entrails of sacrificed animals by special priests called haruspices. This idea of "reading the omens" was to play an important role in later Roman history. Indeed, the Romans considered the Etruscans to be an unusually religious people and preserved much Etruscan belief in their own writings.

Nonetheless, it is Etruscan art, especially tomb painting, that tells us most about this peculiar people. Since the Etruscans believed in a life after death, they built elaborate tombs for their dead -- tombs whose interiors were often made to look like real Etruscan houses. The dead was buried with many of his or her possessions, such as jewelry, clothing, vases, even chariots and household furniture. But the tomb paintings stand out: they are lively frescoes which depict Etruscans in everyday pursuits -- hunting and fishing, dancing, banqueting, wrestling, and reading the omens. The most impressive of these tomb paintings can be found at the site of the Etruscan city of Tarquinia and can be viewed today.

It was to be the fate of this unique civilization to be assimilated by the Romans. First the Romans conquered the Etruscan city of Veii in 396 BC, and soon after some Gauls came down into the Po Valley from the north to march against several Etruscan strongholds. By the end of the 4th century BC, Etruria was fighting a losing battle against the ever-increasing might of Rome. In the end, her unique culture became absorbed into the Roman civilization and Etruria ceased to exist as a political entity. But her influence on Rome made itself felt for many years, and even Roman bridges and aqueducts trace their origins back to this mysterious people of early Italy.