The Etruscan Link

Etruscan civilization has remained something of an enigma for over 3,000 years. No one is quite sure where the Etruscans came from, or why they were so dissimilar from the societies around them in terms of customs and language. Even the civilizations that existed in the Etruscans’ proximity, including those technologically advanced enough to leave written records of their interactions, were consistently puzzled by their obscure origins and alien attributes. At the same time, the Etruscans were well-known for their prophetic skills along with their oddities, and because religion was such a fundamental part of ancient Mediterranean societies, this mysterious people was widely respected for its religious abilities.\textsuperscript{1} As a result of this and Etruria’s rich supply of metals, the Etruscans had frequent commercial, cultural, and linguistic interaction with Mediterranean societies from farther east, most significantly with Greece and Phoenicia, starting in the early- to mid-eighth century BCE. Although latecomers to the written language in comparison to their Greek and Phoenician contacts, the Etruscans did leave behind a substantial written record using an alphabet adapted directly from western Greek settlers of the Italian peninsula. This record reflects the extent to which their burgeoning civilization was transformed by Greek expansion across the Mediterranean.

In this paper, I attempt to broaden our understanding of Etruscan culture as it relates to the Greek colonial context in the eighth to sixth centuries BCE. To do this, I will look closely at the Etruscan language itself as evidence of extensive contact between the two cultures. I approach

\textsuperscript{1} Bonfante 114.
the topic with three research questions, which I will answer in order below: (1) How did the Etruscans and Greeks interact spatially and culturally in the eighth to sixth centuries, before Rome began to increase its presence and influence? (2) What does the development of the Etruscan language tell us about the situation of the Greek language in Italy during this time period? (3) What can the interactions between these two languages tell us about the degree of Greek cultural influence on Etruscan civilization? The final question, which will produce the most intensive original analysis of the linguistic evidence, will take into account evidence of vocabulary crossover in association with three major cultural touchstones: religion, olive oil production, and the symposium. This process will illuminate the most appealing and consequently enduring aspects of Greek culture for the Etruscans as reflected in one of their greatest debts to Greek civilization: the written word.

The Etruscan presence in Italy began before the Greek historical period, which also brought along the advent of writing in the Italian peninsula. For this reason, it is difficult to determine the origins of the Etruscan people and their culture. It is still unclear if they were indigenous or if they migrated from another area of Europe or the Near East, although the most recent analysis of Etruscan mtDNA strongly suggests Italian origins.² Ancient authors and historians also disagree on the origins of the Etruscans: Hesiod’s Theogony claims that they were descendants of Odysseus, Herodotus writes they are ancient immigrants from Lydia in modern-day Turkey, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus believes that they are autochthonous, although he also notes that other scholars believe they were originally Celts. Whatever the case, their language and customs

were extensively developed and clearly influenced by their Italian neighbors before their first contact with Greeks.³

The Etruscan language existed in written form from about 700 BCE through at least the first century CE, but it was spoken for far longer, beginning before the eighth century BCE and possibly in the Late Bronze Age. The major point of difficulty in analyzing and deciphering Etruscan is that it is not Indo-European, nor is it related to any known languages outside of the Indo-European family; it is therefore often designated a language isolate. Etruscan culture seems to reflect this mysterious linguistic origin: it is significantly different from neighboring Italian peoples, despite their aforementioned influences.⁴ Etruscan civilization was ahead of its neighbors, so that “when the Greeks brought civilization to Italy, it was readily adopted by the Etruscans, who were well on their way to urbanization and therefore ready to take on the outward signs of this culture of cities.”⁵ The Etruscans were, accordingly, the most significant recipients of Greek culture in mainland Italy during the earliest period of contact, in the eighth to sixth centuries BCE.

During these early centuries of interaction, before Rome rose to power, contacts between the two civilizations increased steadily. Both groups were also in frequent contact with the Phoenicians, who had established colonies in Sicily not long before. The Greeks had already been trading with peoples in the Near East, and they were attracted to the Tyrrhenian coast of Italy by reports of the Etruscans’ rich supplies of metals. The first Greek settlement in mainland Italy, Pithekoussai, was founded by western Greeks – specifically Euboeans – around 775 BCE as a trading center in the Bay of Naples. Soon after, the same or a similar group established

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³ Bonfante 49-50.
⁴ Bonfante 50.
⁵ Life and Afterlife 7.
another settlement at Cumae. These Euboean transplants had been dealing with civil strife in their homeland and headed west to pursue trade after taking cues from Phoenician contacts. Pithekoussai and Cumae were in an ideal location to avoid conflict with the Phoenicians and to strengthen commercial relations with Etruria.

Although the Euboeans were the first Greeks to interact with Etruria, they were not the only ones, even in the earlier period. Examples of Corinthian, Spartan, and Ionian vases have been discovered at sites in Etruria from throughout the seventh century BCE, and Etruscan goods, mainly metals, have been discovered in Sparta from the same time period, which suggests a direct line of trade without facilitation by the Euboeans. Also during the seventh century, many more and permanent settlements began to pop up in proximity to Etruscan centers like Tarquinia and Caere; archaeological evidence shows that these colonists were mainly from Ionia and the Peloponnese. The presence of so many different groups of Greek colonists made it possible for the Etruscans to be exposed to a wide variety of Greek influences and practices. Overall, the most significant features of civilization that Etruscans adopted from the Greeks, whether Euboean or otherwise, were aristocratic in nature: approaches to athletics, hunting styles, military equipment and tactics, sympotic paraphernalia – and the alphabet.

The historical development of the Etruscan alphabet transmits crucial information about the situation of Greek language and culture in Italy during this time period. The earliest evidence for writing in the Etruscan context comprises copies of a “model” Greek alphabet, mainly on

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6 *Life and Afterlife* 6.
7 *Turfa* 69-70.
8 *Turfa* 70-71.
9 *Turfa* 72. *Turfa* notes that the reclining banquet itself may also have been a Greek import, but that it is more likely that this began prior to Greek contact, possibly through the Phoenicians, who had similar practices. He bases this claim on the presence of early sympotic Etruscan vessels with uniquely Etruscan names and shapes.
decorative objects like drinking cups. It is clear from the morphology of letters on these objects that the Etruscans learned the alphabet from their first Greek trade contacts, the Euboeans of Pithekoussai and Cumae, who had adapted the Semitic alphabet of the Phoenicians. Still, there may be evidence that the Etruscan version of the alphabet may have been influenced by an even earlier iteration of the western Greek alphabet than we have in evidence; for instance, Etruscan retains all three Phoenician sibilants (samech, sade, and šin), which the surviving Greek alphabets, including Euboean, consolidated into only one or two signs. Furthermore, the direction of the earliest Etruscan writing is frequently right to left, like its Phoenician ancestor and unlike Greek, although this is not a rule and varies by location. By the third century BCE, however, Etruscan has almost completely shifted direction to left to right as a result of the influence of Latin. There are also several archaic instances of boustrophedon, fairly common also in archaic Greek, which seems to reflect Greek stylistic affinities. Despite any possible extra-Euboean influence, however, “the second half of the eighth century was the period of vigorous Euboean-Etruscan contact and acculturation, and the most expressive form of this contact was the adoption of the alphabet,” which by around 700 BCE was adapted to suit the unique needs of the Etruscan language.

Eighth-century Etruscans adapted the western Greek alphabet to fit their own phonetics, which, like their culture, was significantly disparate from the other phonetic systems with which it was in contact. Before examining specific instances of Etruscan words and concepts that were influenced by Greek interaction, it is useful to review the basic morphological changes that occurred during the process of adaptation. Etruscan contained no signs for b or d sounds – both

10 Bonfante 52.
11 Bonfante 56.
12 Malkin 165.
voiced stops, which do not exist in Etruscan – or for o; the Greek signs for these sounds (β, δ, and ο; there was no ω in the Euboean dialect) were simply dropped early in the development of the Etruscan alphabet. The sign for γ, the third and final voiced stop, was used to represent a k sound represented as a hard c. Thus, when Greek texts were transliterated into Etruscan, g became c, d became t, and b usually became p. Besides the c sound represented by γ, there were two other types of k sounds, amounting to three total; in general, during the first two to three centuries of Etruscan writing, k came before a, c before e and i, and q before u, although this was eventually simplified in individual cities and their surrounding areas. Although it is clear that there were three sibilants (š, s, and š), as mentioned above, scholars have not been able to determine how they were pronounced and so how they differed phonetically. Because Etruscan lacked o, there were only four vowels, a (“ah”), e (“eh”), i (“ee”), and u (“oo”); in transliterations from Greek, o was transformed to u. Greek diphthongs are normally preserved (although, naturally, oi becomes ui), but Etruscan also tended toward simplifying diphthongs into single vowels (e.g., eu to u).

Three further peculiarities of the Etruscan language are worthy of note here. First, the liquid consonants (m, n, l, and r) often became vocalic, meaning that they were sonant and thus formed syllables on their own (e.g., the adapted Greek mythological name Atlnta was pronounced with a sonant l). Second, Etruscan sometimes added extra vowels to adapted Greek words in order to make them easier for native Etruscan-speakers to pronounce, but which could make even familiar Greek names and terms look foreign (e.g., Artemis was written Aritimi). Finally, the Etruscans, who introduced the sound of f to Italy, sometimes substituted this uniquely Etruscan sign for a Greek one that did not exist in Etruscan, for instance for β (cf. frontac below). They

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13 Latin retains all three signs for the k/hard c sounds, although
first created this new sign by combining the digamma with an $h$ (aspirated $\eta$) to produce the intended effect, but later they adopted a new sign, similar to $\delta$, the origin of which is unknown.\footnote{It is interesting that Latin retained the shape of the digamma for $f$.} The $f$ sound is incredibly rare in Indo-European languages; it is not present at all in any proto-Indo-European scripts and only later in Germanic and Iranian – after the apex of Etruscan civilization – which indicates that it spread from Etruscan into the Italic languages. Etruscan also used an intensive initial accent, which it passed on to Latin, and so it eliminated Greek accents from transliterations.\footnote{Bonfante 75-81.}

With these morphological and phonetic differences fresh in mind, we are now able to turn to the final research question driving this paper: what can the interactions between the Greek and Etruscan languages tell us about the extent and direction of cultural exchange? As of 2002, between 9,000 and 13,000 Etruscan inscriptions had been discovered in both Italy and Greece, with more being discovered regularly. Many have been deciphered, but because the majority are funerary inscriptions, with a consequent emphasis on names and repetitive formulae, these texts do not contain as wide a range of vocabulary as we would like.\footnote{Bonfante 57.} Still, it is clear from these texts that there is a significant amount of vocabulary crossover. As I stated in my introduction, for the purpose of this paper I will focus on words associated with deities and practical religious terminolog; olive oil and its production; and the symposium, all of which were distinctive features of both Greek and Etruscan culture, and which are also the categories that provide the most substantial evidence for linguistic crossover.\footnote{All of the following Etruscan terms can be found in Bonfante’s glossary (214-21). Word frequencies are indicated in (#) from Fowler and so are only current as of 1965; many of the words in Bonfante are not attested in the corpus from which Fowler draws. Frequencies are only noted when they are higher than two.}
The Etruscans had an extensive religious tradition before they came in contact with the Greeks, but a significant amount of synchretism and substitution started soon after that first moment of contact in the eighth century. We saw some adaptations of deity names, those of Atalanta and Artemis, in the examples from the earlier section on morphology and phonetics. The Etruscans did have their own divinities, like the mother goddesses Catha and Cel, yet the Greek tradition seeped into the Etruscan in a variety of ways. Two major deities that not only had their names adapted but who contributed to word-building were Hermes/Ἑρµης (Turmiš) and Bacchus Dionysus/βάκχος Διόνυσος (Pacha Fufluns). The words containing variations of Hermes’ name include heramaśva, herme (5), herma, hermeri, and hermu (3). All of these words refer not to the god – whose Etruscan name occurs very rarely – but to “a statue,” a definition that carried over to Latin, in which both Hermes and herma regularly refer to a herm, not the god himself. Bonfante also glosses hermi- as the root of the Etruscan Ermius, the name of the month that is now August, which indicates that although Etruscan deities existed and continued to be worshipped, Hermes was important enough to apply his name to a month. Bacchus’ name comes up with less frequency but with a wider variety of applications: pachathur stands for a Bacchante or maenad; pachie- and pachana are forms of the adjective “Bacchic”; and the longer pacusnaśie also describes something as “Bacchic” or “Dionysiac.” It is possible that these terms were mainly used by the Etruscans in reference to tales from Greek mythology, but because, as we will see below, the symposium was such a great point of cultural contact between these two peoples, it is also possible that the Bacchic terminology has a role to play there.

18 A list and accompanying descriptions of Etruscan deities can be found in Bonfante’s compilation of mythological figures (192-213).
19 OLD.
Besides deity names, there are at least three more examples of religious terminology with Greek roots, which may be surprising given the Etruscans’ reputation for religious expertise. The term for an interpreter of lightning, *frontac*, most likely comes from the Greek root of βροντάω (“to thunder”) and βροντή (“thunder”); in this case, the b sound in Greek has become f in Etruscan, not p, as is more common.\(^{20}\) Another example is *tmia*, meaning “sacred place,” “sacred building,” or “temple,” the root of which appears to be from the Greek τιμάω (“to honor”) and τίμη (“honor”).\(^{21}\) Finally, the word *teras*, which occurs only once in the evidence available, almost certainly means “prodigy,” from the Greek τέρας, which has the same meaning.\(^{22}\) No other word for a “prodigy” or “portent” is attested, which does lead one to wonder how this is possible, when the Etruscans were especially well-known as naturally gifted diviners. The reason for this lack may simply be the dearth of evidence, but it is impossible to tell.

Perhaps less central to Etruscan civilization than its religious customs, but no less intriguing to us, is the archaeological and linguistic evidence that Etruscans acquired the process of making olive oil from the Greeks of southern Italy. The ceramic vessels for storage of olive oil found in Etruscan contexts retain their original Greek names adapted into Etruscan: a vase labeled *aska* is the shape of the Greek ἀσκός, while another labeled *lechtumuza* appears to be a diminutive of a λήκυθος both linguistically and physically.\(^{23}\) The name for olive oil, too, comes directly from Greek: *eleiva* from ἔλαιον (which became oleum in Latin),\(^{24}\) and the adjective *eleivana* ("of oil," paired with *aska*) as an extended use of the Greek root. Bonfante also identifies the spelling of the Latin word *amurca* (describing the water residue of an olive after it is pressed), from the

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\(^{20}\) Liddell & Scott.
\(^{21}\) Liddell & Scott.
\(^{22}\) Liddell & Scott.
\(^{23}\) Bonfante 217.
\(^{24}\) Liddell & Scott; OLD.
Greek ἀμόργη,\textsuperscript{25} as evidence that it transferred through Etruscan to Latin.\textsuperscript{26} Although this cultural connection may seem less significant than influence on another civilization’s religious customs, the production and consumption of olive oil was a central feature throughout many areas of ancient Greek civilization. Etruscan adoption of the associated practices and terminology acknowledges the importance of olive oil to their Greek contacts in Italy and the appeal of olive oil to the Etruscans themselves, not only as a material benefit of trade but also (if Bonfante is correct about amurca) as a practice to be learned.

A third major point of cultural and linguistic contact occurs in the tradition of the reclining banquet, commonly known as a symposium in Greece. As was the case in the discussion of terminology surrounding olive oil, some of the best evidence of cultural contact comes from the names of vessels used in the relevant practice. The term culichna or chulichna is a diminutive term meaning “little κύλιξ,” a type of Greek vessel used in specifically sympotic contexts. Similarly, cupe, or “drinking vessel,” corresponds to the Greek κόπελλον,\textsuperscript{27} which became cupa in Latin. And it does not stop there: we also find pruch or pruchum (“jug”) from the Greek πρόχοος; put- or puth- (3) as roots for terminology found on different types of drinking vessels, from the Greek adjective πότος, “for drinking,”\textsuperscript{28} with the diminutives putnza and putlimza; and thina, yet another name for a drinking vessel that is derived from the Greek δῖνος.\textsuperscript{29} It goes beyond vessels to the terms for the actual liquids, too: math means “honeyed wine,” corresponding with the Greek µέθυ; vina (“vineyard”) is very close to οἶνη (“vine”); and vinum

\textsuperscript{25} OLD.
\textsuperscript{26} Life and Afterlife 7.
\textsuperscript{27} Liddell & Scott.
\textsuperscript{28} The Etruscan u carries over into Latin puteus (OLD).
\textsuperscript{29} Liddell & Scott.
or vinum (“wine,” and which occurs at least 15 times) is clearly derived from οἶνος. I quoted Turfa above, in note 8, to propose that the actual practice of the reclining banquet probably came to the Etruscans from the Near East, not Greece, but the terminology and physical objects associated with it are undeniably Greek.

There is no concrete evidence that Etruscans and Greeks drank and dined together at symposia in Italy during the eighth to sixth centuries BCE, but some scholars take the presence of sympotic vessels in the Etruscan context – and the rarity of indigenous Etruscan names for these vessels – as evidence that such events much have confirmed, as Malkin does. In her book *The Returns of Odysseus*, she writes, “The close contacts between, especially, the Euboians of [Cumae] and the Etruscans, as well as the dissemination of undisputed Greek symposion paraphernalia and the Etruscan borrowing of Greek names for vases, should lead to the conclusion that Greek influence on the Etruscan symposiac gatherings was strongly felt.” Malkin then goes further than this, suggesting that it was at these very symposia that the characters and ideologies of Greek mythology were transferred to the Etruscan consciousness: “Greek myths of origins and travel seeped into Etruscan culture, perhaps among guest-friends, together with the wine drunk at aristocratic symposia.” Because her book depends on the hypothesis that stories from the Trojan cycle facilitated and illuminated Greek colonization throughout the Mediterranean, she suggests that “heroic and aristocratic terminology,” like that associated with the symposium, was transmitted to the Etruscans through pieces of oral literature like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and thereby “transcended the Greek sphere and were adopted by non-

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30 Liddell & Scott.
31 Malkin 167.
32 Malkin 170.
Greeks as well.” If we were to accept this portion of Malkin’s hypothesis, it would be possible to claim that this is why the names and characters of Greek deities were so appealing to the Etruscans as well, despite the presence of indigenous divinities and mythologies: these foreign divinities fit the new worldview that they were rapidly adopting because of their increasingly friendly and possibly sympotic interactions with Greek settlers.

Although we cannot be sure that Malkin’s hypothesis is correct, we do know that, in the words of Bonfante, “Greek culture first came to Rome by way of Etruria, for the Etruscans, having learned from the Greeks how to represent divinities in human form, build cities and temples, organize armies, drink wine, and use the alphabet, passed on many of these signs of civilization to their neighbors in Italy.” It is unquestionably difficult to comprehend the extent of specific cultural influences on a civilization that was conquered and assimilated more than two millennia ago, but when one of those influences involves the adoption of the alphabet, that civilization is able to retain an enduring voice. The Etruscan language is not as well-preserved as Greek or Latin, but it has held its own, surpassing the lifetime of any other Italic language besides Latin – and its documented history begins much earlier. Because of this, Etruscan provides the earliest window onto the influence of Greek culture in Italy from the Italian perspective.

This paper has considered the issue of cultural influence from the perspective of linguistics, and it has done so by considering the role of a language believed to be more “dead” than Latin. The ancient dynamics of Etruscan as it grew into its status as a written language reveal vital information about with whom the Etruscans interacted at this point in time, what they cared to adopt and adapt from those foreign contacts, and thus opens the window a little wider on who

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33 Malkin 171.
34 Bonfante 51-52.
they were. Although they had an established religious tradition, they were open to accepting new members of their pantheon and even replacing the old with Etruscan versions that bridged the gap between them and their new Greek neighbors. They not only engaged in trade with new peoples but also seem to have learned something about the production of the goods they began to receive. If they did not actually sit side-by-side with the Greeks at symposia, they certainly sat next to one another using Greek vessels, telling Greek tales, and speaking their own versions of Greek words. And they recorded their lives with what was likely the most valuable Greek gift of them all: the alphabet. Armed with this magnified ability to communicate over long distances and periods of time, the Etruscans facilitated the spread of Greek culture in archaic Italy and beyond. Although Etruscan civilization did not last beyond the first century BCE, its legacy did, and a major factor in this was the written word: the Romans were not able to forget that many “borrowings from Greek into Latin [were] on phonetic, orthographical or morphological grounds” indebted to Etruscan.\textsuperscript{35} The complexity of the interactions among Greek, Etruscan, and Latin illuminates the deep links among all three civilizations and reminds us that, without the development of written Etruscan, the links between the two most esteemed examples of classical language and culture – Greece and Rome – might never have been as strong as they are.

\textsuperscript{35} Adams 163.
Bibliography


