

0. THE ETRUSCANS - Story Preface

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Frescoes like this one, from the "Tomb of the Leopards" at the Necropolis of Monterozzi—an ancient burial site near the city of Tarquinia in the Lazio Region of Italy—provide some information about the Etruscans, an early Iron-Age people who today are mostly shrouded in mystery.

Long before the rise of Rome, while various tribes lived in the country we know as Italy, the Etruscans dominated the central part of the Italian peninsula. Before Latin became the language of an Empire, Etruscan was the language of a people today mostly shrouded in mystery.

Although it was the Etruscans who passed on the alphabet to the Romans, their ancient language (which was non-Indo-European) died out in the first century B.C. after Etruscans became Roman citizens.

Since there is no surviving Etruscan literature, what we know of the people comes from archeological remains or indirect sources. What we know of their language comes mostly from inscriptions written on extremely old objects.

In 1992, an Etruscan inscription on a bronze plate found in Cortona caused a great deal of excitement among scholars. The find, representing one of the longest Etruscan-language inscriptions located to-date, included twenty-seven lexemes which were completely unknown before the plate was discovered.

The two-sided bronze table, known as the Tabula Cortonensis, is very likely a document exchange between two families. First publicized in Italian newspapers on 1 July 1999, it is probably from the second or third century, B.C. It is broken in eight pieces, one of which is still missing. The names of people who "signed" the document likely appear on Side A.

We can see how the plate must have looked originally when its seven located parts are put together in an apograph. We can also examine a transliteration (from its original Greek-like letters to English letters), although many of its words (the link depicts Side B) are still unknown to scholars.

Somewhat less uncertain is the impact of the Etruscan League, although it, too, is cloaked with mystery. As treasures once covered by Tuscan hills continue to provide scholars with clues to understanding this ancient people and their country, our knowledge of them, and their way of life, will continue to increase.

The same, one hopes, will also be true of the Etruscans' neighbors - the Umbrians.

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Etruscan Art from Tomb of the Leopards

In this image we see a fresco, depicting dancers and musicians from the Etruscan era, located at the Necropolis of Monterozzi (which is situated east of Tarquinia in the Lazio Region of Italy).

The fresco, which was created circa 475 B.C., is now part of a World Heritage Site. It appears on the wall of a burial chamber known as “Tomb of the Leopards.” It is one of about 6,000 grave sites at Monterozzi’s “City of the Dead.”

The official website, for the National Archaeological Museum of Tarquinia, tells us more about the ancient people who are buried at these grave sites and what their frescoes depict:
In 2004, the Necropolis was declared to be a UNESCO World Heritage Site because it hosts an exceptional monumental cycle of painted tombs described as “the first chapter in the history of great Italian painting.” It is the largest necropolis in the area around the ancient Etruscan city of Tarquinia, comprising more than 6,000 underground Etruscan tombs that completely cover the extensive hill of Monterozzi.



Adorned with scenes of human life that include huntsmen, fishermen, musicians, dancers, jugglers and athletes, the painted tombs illustrate the wealth and power of the occupants for whom they were built: They are a fitting symbol of their high social status.

Etruscan painting is all the more important because we have lost all trace of Greek painting: we can only imagine how it may have looked by studying the decorations in some of the exceptional tombs in Tarquinia, where experts have theorised that they see the hand of Greek artists who were attracted to Italy to decorate the last resting places of wealthy Etruscans. These sentiments are echoed by scholars writing on behalf of New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. Among other things, Colette and Seán Hemingway tell us that: Much of what we know about the Etruscans comes not from historical evidence, but from their art and the archaeological record.

Click on the image for a better view.

Fresco from Tomb of the Leopards at Necropolis of Monterozzi, a World Heritage Site. Image online via Wikimedia Commons.

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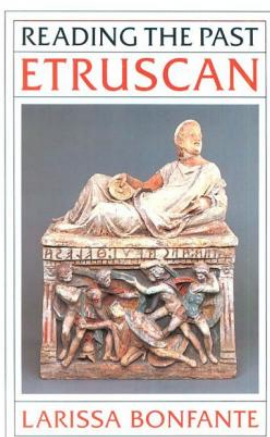
Map of Ancient Italy

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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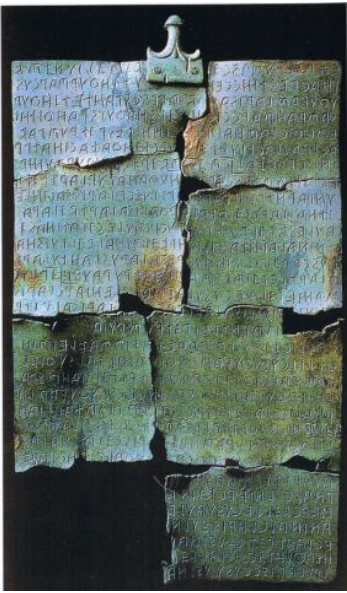


Reading the Past: Etruscan - by Larissa Bonfante

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Tabula Cortonensis - Side B

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Tabula Cortonensis - With the Writings Put Together

Transcription of the *Tabula Cortonensis* by Professor Mel Copeland.

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View of the Greek-Like Letters

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