

PAPER

Guelphs, Ghibellines and Etruscans: Archaeological Discoveries and Civic Identity in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Tuscany

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This paper examines the rediscovery of the ancient Etruscans, in central Italy, during the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries AD. Knowledge about the Etruscans from this earlier period was overshadowed by the interest in Etruscan antiquities promoted by Pope Leo X (1513–1521) and Cosimo I de Medici (1519–1574) during the late Renaissance. I argue that the sixteenth century appropriation of the Etruscan past would not have been possible without the discoveries of earlier generations of Tuscans, and, more particularly, without a reversal in attitudes towards the Etruscan past that began during the late thirteenth century. Prior to this, the Etruscans were perceived negatively, as allied to darkness and paganism. In this paper, I argue that this change in the perception of the Etruscans was closely allied to the particular political situation of the city-state of Florence, and that the origins of Etruscan archaeology can be elucidated in the centre of the maelstrom of war, famine and plague that characterised the fourteenth century in central Italy.

Introduction

The birth of Etruscan archaeology is commonly dated to the eighteenth century, and the mania for ‘Etruscheria’ which swept Europe, filling aristocratic salons with expensive Etruscan inspired objects (Cristofani, 1983). The professionalization of the discipline took place in the nineteenth century, forged amidst the tumult of the ‘Risorgimento’ and the unification of Italy into a single nation (Guidi, 2010).

However, the beginning of interest in Etruscan archaeology developed many centuries earlier. During the Renaissance antiquarian collectors such as the de Medici Pope Leo X (1513–1521) and the first Archduke of Tuscany, Cosimo I de Medici (1519–1574) collected and conserved Etruscan artefacts excavated on their estates and holdings. Cosimo I is rumoured to have contributed to the restoration of the famous Chimaera of Arezzo with his own hands, as fascinated as any modern scholar, although perhaps less fastidious (Gáldy, 2009: 123–129). His collections became the basis of what is now the Florence Archaeological Museum. Giovanni Cipriani’s masterful volume *Il mito etrusco nel rinascimento fiorentino* (The Etruscan Myth in Renaissance Florence: Cipriani, 1980) analysed the influence of the Etruscans during this later period, of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in great

detail, exploring the connections between the resurgence of interest in the Classical past and the reclamation of the regional heritage of Florence itself.

The ancient Etruscans provided local credibility for the transformation of the politics and identity of the de Medici family, the banking dynasty that dominated Florence from the late fifteenth century onwards. They claimed descent from Porsenna, the legendary King of Tuscany who fought against the Romans (Cipriani, 1980: 108), to support the de Medici campaign for the unification of what the de Medici wanted others to perceive as their traditional inheritance: the lands between the Tiber and the Arno Rivers that were occupied by their Etruscan ancestors. The de Medici appropriation of an Etruscan heritage justified Florentine military aggression during the sixteenth century (Pult Quaglia, 2009).

This appropriation of the Etruscan past during the post-Medieval period was not a sudden explosion interest in the past after a long preoccupation with squabbling between the city-states of Tuscany and their political factions. It was, in fact, the product of this constant regional fighting and factionalism. As Benès (2011: 4) has pointed out, with regard to the Roman past, Etruscan studies also emerged from the first discoveries of Etruscan artefacts at Arezzo in the late thirteenth century, and were created and shaped by the political turmoil of the fourteenth century. Without this early formative period of two hundred and fifty years, the activities of the de Medici and the development of Etruscology would have been very different.

While this period has been acknowledged, in terms of archaeological discoveries (DeGrummond, 1986: 12),

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its significant impact on the foundation of ideas about Etruscan archaeology has been ignored. The connections between Italian nationalism, colonial powers and the Etruscan past are still evident in the key debates about the modern discipline (Torelli, 1987: 9–10; Loney, 2002; Rajala, 2004) and all of these have their parallels and origins in the Middle Ages, a period in which the rulers of Tuscany were torn between self-interest, allegiance to the papacy, and the external influence of the Holy Roman Emperors.

This paper begins with an introduction to the political situation of central Italy during the mid-thirteenth century, to provide the context in which discoveries about the Etruscan past were being made. Then it examines the role of the Etruscans during three consecutive time periods. During each period I analyse the representation of the Etruscans in literature and art, beginning with the work of Dante and Giotto, during the late thirteenth century. At the same time I will also examine the political context of each of these periods, to demonstrate that it is the political events that were most influential on the representation of the Etruscans. Through this analysis, it is possible to trace a transformation in the image of the Etruscans. They were originally used and regarded as symbols of a dark and pagan past, which was rightfully subsumed by Roman power. After the rise of the papacy as a temporal power, that then became a threat to Florentine independence during the 1370s, the Etruscans re-emerged as heroic ancestors, closely allied to civic liberty and humanist values. I argue that this early 'Etruscan Renaissance' is the point of origin for development of Etruscan archaeology.

Between Pope and Emperor

The origins of the political situation of the late Medieval period in central Italy may be found in the tumultuous events of the previous three hundred years, and perhaps, even originate in the turmoil of the breaking-up of the Western Roman Empire. After a series of invasions by Goths and Lombards during the AD eighth century (Randers Pehrson, 1983: 211–229; Christie, 2006: 21–22), the Roman Church requested aid from the Frankish king Charlemagne, who was eventually invested as Holy Roman Emperor in 800 CE, twenty years after his defeat of the Lombard threat (Collins, 1998: 147). At Charlemagne's coronation by Pope Leo III, the two factions of papacy and Holy Roman Empire, that would later dominate Italian Medieval politics, were united for the first time. The Franks' military invasions not only re-established the connection between the empire and the ownership of Italy endorsed by the papacy, but also provided for a situation of deep insecurity for those city-states and regions outside of the protection of these two powers. The result of this was that the cities of northern and central Italy were forced to become more independent and self-reliant. The earliest challenges against foreign rulers, such as bishops or imperial officials, by local authorities, date to the tenth century (Jones, 1997: 131). After AD 1164, individual cities in northern Italy banded

together in the military and diplomatic alliance known as the 'Lombard League'. Initially between Verona, Vicenza, Padua and Treviso, it soon expanded to include most of the principal cities of Lombardy and, with the support of the threatened Pope, Alexander III, the league was able to muster armies sufficient to defeat the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa, at the Battle of Legnano in 1176 (Waley and Dean, 2010: 88).

After Legnano, the cities of northern and central Italy were politically free to develop independently from both Papal Rome and the Holy Roman Empire. After the Second Treaty of Constance in 1183, members of the Lombard League conducted diplomatic relations between each other, and implemented their own laws and restrictions on activities within their cities' boundaries. The system of consular rule, developed during the previous century in cities such as Pisa, Milan and Arezzo, matured into the establishment of larger consulates, acclaimed by general assemblies of the people, ruling with the aid of councils (Waley and Dean, 2010: 36–38). These cities now assumed the form of city-republics or city-states, ruling over a rural hinterland, self-governing and, more importantly for this argument, self-identifying. However, these autonomous positions remained vulnerable: the cities were at risk of attack both by other city republics, and by the larger powers in the region, i.e. by the expansion of the Papal States northwards, or by the return of the Holy Roman Empire's dominion in the north. These two larger powers were, at the same time, the region's biggest threat and its protectors, with individual cities supporting the faction that seemed less perilous to its own independence. The pro-papacy groups had adopted the name 'Guelphs' by around the mid-thirteenth century, while the Holy Roman Empire's supporters were known as 'Ghibellines'. The names originate from battle cries from an earlier imperial skirmish at Weinsburg in 1140, and were adapted into Italian from German through a lengthy evolution detailed by Raveggi (2009: 7–13).

From 1250 onwards Florence was primarily a Guelph city, albeit with a strong Ghibelline faction. Different families adhered to the two factions, with guilds and districts also allied to Pope or Emperor. There was an important class distinction as well: in Florence, nobles favoured the imperial cause, while merchants and the growing upper middle class supported the Pope. Rival cities were allied to different groups, with the smaller republics of Siena and Pisa, along with Arezzo, allied to the Ghibelline cause, in opposition to the Florentine Guelphs. Orvieto and Perugia, on the other hand, remained staunchly Guelph. At the Battle of Montaperti, fought between Siena and Florence on September 4, 1260, the Florentine Guelphs lost, causing the reintroduction of a Ghibelline authority over the city. Although this was then swiftly overturned by the Guelphs, with the aid of Pope Clement IV. It is at this point, in the later thirteenth century, that the first discoveries of the Etruscan heritage of Tuscany were made, and it is also at this point that the image of the Etruscans first became important to the identity of the Florentine city state.

Barbarians and Sorcerers: 1282–1330

It is curiously appropriate that it was the growth in civic population during the late thirteenth century, in combination with military aggression that resulted in the earliest recorded excavation of Etruscan artefacts.

The city of Arezzo, 80 kms southeast of Florence, was an important Etruscan city during the fifth and fourth centuries BC and comprises substantial Etruscan remains. It was an independent city-state from the AD tenth century until the end of the thirteenth century, and an adversary of Florence during this period. In the 1280s, in response to renewed Florentine aggression, and to the expansion of its population, the people of Arezzo began work on a series of new city walls, which would reach their largest extent under the pro-imperial bishop Guido Tarlati in the early fourteenth century.

While the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250) had deliberately searched for Roman antiquities in Lazio to bolster his status in 1204, the rediscovery of the Etruscan past of Tuscany was coincidental (Weiss, 1988: 12). The foundations dug in Arezzo in the 1280s, in search of earlier city walls, uncovered ceramics unfamiliar to the Medieval audience. These were described by the chronicler Ristoro d'Arezzo, in his 1282 work *Composizione del Mondo* (The Composition of the World) alongside descriptions of the signs of the zodiac, a solar eclipse, and geology, as another quasi-natural wonder. D'Arezzo describes what were vases as: 'blue and red ... light and subtle, without heaviness' and describes their decoration as covered in images of animals, fish and birds (D'Arezzo, 1872: 137). Other pottery found, such as red-slipped Roman Aretine wares, does not fit this description, neither does the earlier red and black Etruscan painted wares, or the imported Attic black or red figure wares. So while Ristoro d'Arezzo

does not explicitly name the vases as Etruscan, nor make the link to the Etruscan heritage of his city, it seems likely that is, in fact, what they were.

The lack of a known and explicit connection between Etruscan artefacts and the Etruscan heritage of the region seems strange, particularly because of the visibility of the Etruscans in the Roman sources available to Medieval scholars at this time. Livy, Pliny and Virgil all consider the Etruscan role in wars with Rome at length, and yet, in the two primary sources for the early development of what Cipriani (1980) calls 'the Etruscan myth', the words Etruscan and Etruria are absent, while undoubtedly Etruscan figures played key roles.

It has been suggested that Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) was unaware of the Etruscans' historical role (Schoonhoven, 2010: 460), or that he misread the ancient sources (Mazzocco, 2012) when he failed to name two key characters in his *Divine Comedy* as Etruscan: the wizard Aruns (Alighieri, 1987: Inferno XX 46) and the legendary king of Tuscany Porsenna (Alighieri, 1987: Paradiso IV 84). In addition, Dante chose to ignore Virgil's account of the foundation of Mantua by the Etruscan hero Ocno (Alighieri, 1987: Aeneis X 198), preferring instead to credit this to the Theban magician Manto (Alighieri, 1987: Inferno XX). Schoonhoven (2010: 469) notes these issues and suggests that the cause of Dante's apathy towards the Etruscans was his fractious relationship with Florence and, by definition, his own Tuscan identity. Dante acknowledges Florence as 'the fairest daughter of Rome', claiming a firmly Roman past for his city (Alighieri, 2005: *Convivio* I, iii: 4). But he relegates the Etruscans to positions in hell, and blames them for the factional violence in Florence through references to the legacy of the pre-Roman settlement at Fiesole. Dante does not even grant them the



Fig. 1: Image of Satan from Giotto's Last Judgement in the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua. Image: the Art Archive.



Fig. 2: Image of Etruscan Demons, Tomb of the Blue Demons, Tarquinia. Image: Soprintendenza per i Beni Culturali, Etruria Meridionale.

specificity of a cultural group: rather than ignorance, it is deliberate exclusion that keeps the Etruscans unnamed and unglorified. As pagan barbarians, they were not a people to credit with the foundation of Italian cities.

The infernal connection of the Etruscans, used by Dante, can also be found in art work from this earlier period. The role of the Etruscans as unnamed evil-doers and necromancers continued in the work of the artist Giotto di Bondone (1266–1337). His representations of both Satan and Judas in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padova are strikingly similar to the Etruscan images of the demon Charun (DeGrummond, 1986: 21–24; Van Velzen, 1999: 172–173). The image of Satan from the Last Judgement fresco in particular (see **Figure 1**), comprises many of the themes of demonic imagery from Etruscan tomb painting. Painted ca. 1306, the use of dark blue-black colour on Satan's skin and the depiction of striped, viper-like snakes are both familiar motifs used in earlier Etruscan tomb paintings. Whether Giotto himself had access to images like those from the Tomb of the Blue Demons at Tarquinia (440–420 BCE) (see **Figure 2**) is debatable, but the clear association between the Etruscans and devilry remains. Giotto, a Florentine like Dante, although working far from the heartland of Etruscan influences, remained faithful to what seems to have been a representative motif of the Etruscans as connected with pre-Roman, and more importantly, pre-Christian malevolence. Allegiance to the Roman Church and the papacy provided further reasons for Florentines to choose not to identify the Etruscans as their ancestors, but as evil-doers, sources of inspiration for images of Satan and bound in hell for eternity.

Literary and artistic sources are not the only evidence for the negative view of the Etruscans held during this period. The chronicler Giovanni Villani (1280–1348) began his *Nuova Cronica* ca. 1300, documenting the

history of his native Florence. As Schoonhoven (2010: 460) points out, Villani does not explicitly use the terms Etruscan or Etruria any more than Dante does. However, he does take the first steps towards defining a Florentine identity that was independent from Rome, when he described the pre-Roman activities of the legendary King Atlas, descendent from Japheth and Noah. It is Atlas, and his son Italus, who founded the town of Fiesole, (8 kms from Florence and autonomous from it until 1125) while a second son Dardanus founded the city of Troy (Wickstead, 1872: Cronica Book I: 6–11). In this way, the Florentines are both independent from, and ancestors to, the Romans, who returned to Italy from Troy with Aeneas. Villani, who saw himself as a 'true Guelph' and supporter of the papacy (Clarke, 2007: 115) determinedly bound Florence to Rome, both as ancestor and as eventual subject, with the former role satisfying his civic pride. In Rome's conquest of Fiesole, and the destruction of the ancient city, native Fiesolans are depicted as treacherous murderers of the Roman leader Fiorinus, and his wife and children in their sleep (Wickstead, 1872: Cronica Book I: 35–36). For Villani, it was this act of cowardice that caused Julius Caesar to destroy Fiesole and found Florence in its place.

Villani, like Dante, blamed the quasi-Etruscan Fiesolans for the contemporary political turmoil in Florence. During this period, the victorious Guelph party had divided into two factions, one of which, the 'White' Guelphs, had been expelled from the city by the victorious 'Black' Guelphs, who were more loyal to the papacy and fanatical in its support, and ensured the kind of continued loyalty to the vision of ancient Rome which is evident in Villani's work. The binding together of the civilised Romans (i.e., the supporters of the papacy, the Black Guelphs) with the rude Fiesolans (the diminished White Guelphs) resulted in the rebellion of the uncivilised latter, and, as Villani was

writing, the repetition of Caesar's victory. The expulsion of the White Guelphs also resulted in Villani using archaeological evidence to elucidate the history of Florence. In the area where White Guelph houses were destroyed (as a consequence of their expulsion and punishment) the Roman foundations of Villani's city were uncovered (Wickstead, 1872: Cronica Book 36). Here is an early example of archaeological evidence being utilised to justify contemporary politics.

Despite the discoveries at Arezzo, the influences on Giotto, and the naming of the Etruscans in sources known to writers and chroniclers during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, at this stage it was politically astute for the Florentines to downplay the importance of the Etruscans, and to present themselves as closely linked to Rome. The presentation of Etruscan descendants as saboteurs in the city-republic, undermining its connections with the papacy, was mirrored by the representation of the Etruscans as ineffably linked with the forces of darkness, whether murdering children in Villani's chronicle, practising necromancy in Dante, or giving physical form to Satan in the art of Giotto. The suppression of Etruscan discoveries would continue for as long as the Etruscans remained politically unspeakable, and the naming of objects and individuals as Etruscan only began when the name lost its association with wickedness and took on new symbolic associations and a new and useful role, as would happen during the remainder of the fourteenth century.

Discoveries and Developments: 1330–1390

In Europe the mid-fourteenth century remains notorious as a time of disasters: famine struck Tuscany in 1328–1330; and seventeen years later the first outbreak of the Black Death (the pandemic, caused by Bubonic plague) occurred. While these two events significantly reduced the population of the region as a whole, the city of Florence was less severely affected (Epstein, 1991: 18). In fact Florence expanded her territory and control beyond her traditional hinterlands directly after the famine, conquering San Gimignano, Prato and Colle, during the plague years, 1347 and 1348 (Zorzi, 2004: 10). This was due to the extreme growth in population Florence had experienced over the previous fifty years (to around 90,000 in 1338, according to Villani, in Day, 2002: 95) that acted as a kind of a buffer to the ravages of famine and pandemic. While other cities such as Pisa, Siena and Arezzo struggled to recover from the population loss caused by plague and famine (Levine, 2001: 330–331) Florence's larger population and the city's economic growth during the years prior to the plague, not only saved it, but also gave it political and economic advantages over these other smaller, shattered, regional city-states. The increase in Florentine military aggression during this period suggests that these advantages were not wasted, and the Florentines became steadily more confident in matters of war. However, the experiences of these decades of disasters were devastating for every city-state in region (Henderson, 1992; Byrne, 2006: 51), and during them, the Etruscans were forgotten. The Florentine historian, Cipriani (1980: 5–6) skimmed

over this entire period, moving directly from the work of Villani (who died of plague in 1348, leaving his chronicle unfinished, but continued by his brother) to discussion of a letter written in 1383, some fifty years later, and after all of the crises had passed.

However, while the tragedies of death and destruction of this period laid the foundations for the resurgence of Florence as a military and economic power, it was during the mid-fourteenth century that the beginning of a change in attitude towards the Etruscans took place. Schoonhoven (2010: 470) draws attention to the work of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), writing around 1341. A native of Certaldo (a town located between Florence and Siena), he grew up in Florence working for his father, who he followed to Naples in 1326. While away, Boccaccio developed his interests in poetry, writing his first major work, the *Filocolo* (The Love Afflicted) in 1336. This first offering focused on Tuscany, and references the stock figure of Porsenna of Chiusi, one of a cast of characters in a story heavily informed by pre-Christian mythology and religious practices. Having established his interests in the region of his birth, Boccaccio's later work (1341–42), *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* (The Comedy of the Nymphs of Florence, also known as *L'Ameto*: Boccaccio, 1985) presented Tuscany as an Arcadian vision and, for the first time, names it Etruria (Boccaccio, 1985: 5). The story of the shepherd Ameto, who is transformed by his love for Lia, a nymph pledged to Venus, was also the story of the changes taking place in Florence, a city previously coarse and focused on survival, now transformed through contact with the ancient past into a culturally superior metropolis. Here, and for the first time, the Etruscans are directly associated with beauty rather than with treachery, and it marks the beginning of their rehabilitation as the proud ancestors of an independent Florence.

Florence began another period of military aggression during the later fourteenth century. A campaign against Pisa in 1364, was followed by the commencement in 1375 (and until 1378), of what came to be known as The War of the Eight Saints, during which Florence led a coalition of city-states against the Pope. While Florence had been dominated by the pro-papacy Guelph faction, the success of its regional expansion and aggression, combined with the relocation of the Pope, Clement V and his successors to Avignon, in France (after 1309), eroded Florentine papal allegiance and replaced it with confidence and self-reliance. In addition, the expansion of the Papal State domains to include lands previously conquered by Florence, and the numbers of papal mercenaries fresh from battle with Milan and looking for employment, threatened the city. The Florentines responded by inciting rebellion in cities within the Papal States.

It is in this context that the next explicit reference to the Etruscans materialised: and, unsurprisingly, this time it is being used against Rome. Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), the humanist chancellor of the city of Florence, appointed in 1374, was recorded writing to the city of Perugia in 1383, at the end of The War of the Eight Saints, to request their allegiance to Florence. As an admired Latin scholar,

Salutati's knowledge of the Etruscan world was gleaned from his explorations of ancient texts, and he put it to good use in the service of his city. His inflammatory letter, quoted by Cipriani (1980: 3) incites the Perugians to join Florence in an allegiance that will return Tuscany to its ancient magnificence. Furthermore, Salutati also described such an allegiance as that of a 'single Etruscan people' of the region, reunited once more against Rome.

From unmentionable barbarians, the Etruscans have now become a rallying point for rebellion against the dominance of Rome. It is tempting to speculate that perhaps Pope Gregory XI's interdict against Florence, invoked later in The War of the Eight Saints, prompted this reconciliation with pagan identities, while the loss of respect for the Church of Rome enabled the resurgence of the Etruscans as an alternate ancient heritage for the city. The decline of the Guelph party mirrored the decline of the power of Rome in Florence, and both were caused by the city's resurgence from the disasters of famine and plague. The combination of independent success in war and commerce, and estrangement from the papacy, resulted in a search for different origins for the perceived greatness of the Florentine republic. From Boccaccio's description of Etruria as a land of plenty and beauty, Etruscan shared ancestry became the subject of regional propaganda during a war. The devastation of the famine and the experience of suffering during the plague, undoubtedly created the need for escapism: and Boccaccio's response of an idealised world of Etruscan nymphs and Etruscan virtues provided one such escapist fantasy. While records of archaeological discoveries of the Etruscan world made during this period do not survive, it was during this same period that the seeds of the later Renaissance interest in Etruscan archaeology were sown, and it was during The War of the Eight Saints (1375–78) that the ancient Etruscans became closely intertwined with Florentine civic and republican identity. The association between the Etruscans and the values of erudition and independence only increased, as the Florentine Renaissance developed from the wreckage of the fourteenth century.

Ancestors and Heroes: 1390–1480

The outcome of The War of the Eight Saints demonstrated Florence's growing confidence: while the treaty between the city and the papacy which concluded the war was expensive for the Florentines, it guaranteed their independence and safety from inclusion within the Papal States. During the 1390s, Florence's military aggression was directed northwards, and a Florentine expedition led by English mercenary Sir John Hawkwood, fought to within ten miles of the city of Milan. Florence's economic success also continued, and the product of both these successful industries of war and commerce was the increase in the patronage of arts and humanistic learning. In 1397 the first professor of Classical Greek was appointed at the University of Florence, testimony to the increasing value of knowledge of the ancient world. From this point onwards, humanist scholars collected, copied and circulated Greek and Roman manuscripts, increasing knowledge, not only

of the Classical past, but also knowledge of their own Etruscan heritage. The change in attitudes towards the Etruscans that had occurred over the previous fifty years prompted further investigations into the civic history of Florence. Historians of the new humanism began to explore the potential for using the Etruscans as ballast for the republican city-state, removing the need for allegiance to Rome, while at the same time retaining a connection to ancient (and local) mysteries. Art and architecture were also inspired by the Etruscan past, so that by the end of the fifteenth century, the archaeological interests and endeavours of later pioneer Etruscan archaeologists like Leo X and Cosimo I de Medici would fit neatly around the Etruscanità of the burgeoning Florentine Renaissance.

During the early fifteenth century the philosopher and historian, Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444), recognised and wrote about the importance of Etruscan history. While Villani had written about the Tuscans, and Boccaccio and Salutati had named them Etruscans, based on the written sources that survived, it was Bruni who was the first to connect the figures of Tuscan myth with the historical reality of the Etruscans. Bruni's two volume chronicle the *History of the Florentine People* (Bruni, 1723–1751), written in 1415, was almost modern in its three part structure, which may seem familiar to the contemporary reader. Bruni divided his history into the Classical past, a 'Dark Age' in which the knowledge of the ancient world was lost, and his own time of rediscovery (Cochrane, 1981: 14). The Etruscans are part of the first Classical world, and for Bruni they are the earliest incarnation of Florentine civilisation and therefore, the first form of ideal statehood.

Bruni was born in 1370 in Arezzo, an independent city-state until 1384, when it came under Florentine and de Medici domination. He came to Florence as a young man and studied intensively with Salutati, learning Greek and translating Aristotle and Plato, as well as Thucydides and Polybius, an experience which shaped his historical writing practice (Ianziti, 2007: 249). The temptation to connect Bruni's interest in the Etruscans with both the discoveries in his hometown of Arezzo and with these early experiences working with Salutati is great. There is no doubt that Salutati's recognition of the political potential of the Etruscans was passed on to his most famous pupil, who would reinvent their image as cultural ancestors, rather than finding them useful as co-operative political leverage on fellow Tuscan cities in times of war. This latter role became outdated in any case. Florence dominated the region throughout the fifteenth century, conquering Pisa in 1406, and in 1432, exorcising the ghost of Montaperti by defeating Siena at the battle of San Romano.

Bruni's history focused on the political organization of the Etruscans. In Book 1 (Bruni, 1723–1751) he demonstrated that, at its earliest incarnation, Tuscany was ruled over by a single king, who was later undermined and replaced by republican government. The parallels with the contemporary removal of Florentine allegiance to Pope, Emperor or ruler, and its replacement with popular rule, were obvious. Bruni compared the role of magistrates in Etruscan government with the duties of the *podesta* in

Florence, while the importance of the Etruscan council was also emphasised in his account (Bruni, 1723–1751, Book 1: 68). Bruni was also the first scholar to recognise the extent of ancient Etruscan influence, describing their dominance over the neighbouring Umbrians and Apennine peoples, and suggesting that they ruled over the Romans and peoples of the Veneto as well. The idea of Florentines ruling Romans was an attractive one for his audience, and provided an ancient role-model for their contemporary political potential when allied to an Etruscan style government of the people. Even while describing the Roman conquest of the Etruscans, Bruni presented the latter as scoring a longer lasting, cultural victory, through their knowledge of divine mysteries and fortune-telling. This image of the ‘Mysterious Etruscan’ is one that has survived to the present day, and must also have been popular in Renaissance Florence, where humanists could appeal to their heritage of knowledge, seeing themselves as only the latest in a line of wise and learned Tuscans. The beautiful escapism and brazen propaganda of the fourteenth century was no longer enough: Bruni’s chronicle demonstrates the new fifteenth century role of the Etruscans as ancestors of renown.

Bruni was not, however, the only historian to be interested in the Etruscans during this period of rediscovery of the ancient world. While his focus was on their political and religious relationship with the Florentine Renaissance, another scholar became fascinated by their artistic and architectural heritage. Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), was the illegitimate son of a rich Florentine family of cloth merchants. He was hailed as ‘the greatest literary genius of the age’, a man who worked extensively on both factual subjects and his own compositions (Holmes, 1992: 85). In his treatise on art, *De Pittura* (On Painting: Alberti,

1991), Alberti recognised the creative contribution of the Etruscans to the contemporary Florentine art scene, the subject of this book. He describes them as master painters, and in doing so, tellingly refers to the Etruscans as ‘our most ancient Tuscans’, clearly claiming descent from these masters of art (Alberti, 1991: 78). In his later work *De Re Aedificatoria* (On the Art of Building in Ten Books: Alberti, 1988), Alberti resurrects the figure of Tuscan King Porsenna: not as a tyrant, but as an architect. This book focused on the use of architecture for the creation of an ideal city, filled with utopian citizens, and designated the origin and inspiration for this city to the labyrinthine tombs created by the Etruscans (Alberti, 1988: 455–457). Porsenna’s creation of a subterranean masterpiece formed the basis for an Etruscan heritage of grand buildings, in which the creations of Florentine architects were the latest examples. For Alberti, the mastery of the Etruscans explained Florentine genius, and provided a steady platform of independent innovation from which his contemporaries could reach the ultimate heights of artistic expression.

The knowledge of Etruscan art in Bruni’s and Alberti’s chronicles did not rely on any particular excavations or discoveries. However, art made in Florence at this time, certainly appears to have been influenced by actual Etruscan archaeology. Cipriani (1980: 21) argues that the early Florentine Renaissance painter and sculptor, Donatello di Niccolò di Betto Bardo (1386–1466), was undoubtedly influenced by exposure to Etruscan art, and his creations provide details of the transformation in the role of the Etruscans as artistic inspiration. While Giotto had used Etruscan imagery to create Satan, for Donatello the Etruscan style was used in a far more positive fashion. His statue of St George, created for the church of Orsanmichele in Florence in 1417–1418 (see **Figure 3**), was certainly simi-



Fig. 3: Head of Donatello’s St George from the Church of Orsanmichele. Image: Florence Museums Service.



Fig. 4: Head of Malavolta from Veii. Image: Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia.

lar, in its execution, to a head of Malavolta from Veii, dating to the fifth century BC. The Veii head's eyes and ears (compare **Figures 3 and 4**) appear to have been copied and used on the St George statue, and some of Donatello's other work certainly seems to follow an Etruscan tradition. For example, his later sculpture of the Madonna of Padua, made between 1446–1453, uses elements of Etruscan sculpture in the representation of the seat of the Virgin, which is supported by sphinxes very similar to those from a tomb at Chianciano Terme (a town 50kms south-east of Siena).

Etruscan images have undergone a complete reversal in their use and associations. Once fit only for treacherous Judas and the incarnation of evil, elements and details from Etruscan art were found on the faces of the saints and as support for the Virgin. Etruscan heritage had been reclaimed from Rome, and would now go on to play an important role in the creation of Medici Florence and the continuation of the Renaissance.

As to excavation and discovery, the following, slightly apocryphal, tale demonstrates the new role of Etruscan artefacts, while relating their simultaneous destruction. After the discovery of bronze artefacts in Etruscan tombs near Fiesole, the pieces were melted down and used to create the doors of the Church of San Lorenzo, an act commemorated by the poet Gentile Becchi (Bartoloni and Bocci Pacini, 2003: 450–451). The Etruscans were now literally incorporated into Renaissance Florence, built into the edifice of the city and the church, respected ancestors and masters of art.

Foundations Laid: Conclusion

This paper has described the complete transformation of the image and the associations of the ancient Etruscans during the late Medieval period in Florence. Politics and archaeology are always closely intertwined, but in this case, it is easier to discern how the complicated politics of fourteenth century central Italy gave birth to the new discipline of Etruscan archaeology. The growing political independence of Florence necessitated the identification of new ancestry separate to that of Rome. The cataclysmic events of famine, plague and warfare created the need to escape into an ancient, idealised past.

In the fifteenth century Florence became increasing confident and comfortable with the Etruscans as their esteemed ancestors, incorporating local historical identities into the neoclassical arts and humanities of the Renaissance. The rehabilitation of the Etruscans from demons and pagans to honoured guardians of ancient knowledge in less than two hundred years demonstrates the strength that political events have in shaping any understanding of the past. In art, in history and in philosophy, the Etruscans emerged from Roman propaganda to become the progenitors of Tuscan nationalism, the position they still hold, to some extent, in modern Tuscany.

During the 1490s, Lorenzo 'The Magnificent' de Medici deliberately searched for, and excavated Etruscan artefacts for his collection, and later on his heirs followed the same practice: to enhance, and justify, their familial

connections to the ancient rulers of their lands. However, without the preceding two centuries of transformation of the image and associations of the ancient Etruscans, the archaeological excavations of the de Medici would not have been contemplated. Etruscan archaeology owes its existence and its beginning to the aggression of the early Florentine republic, and to its survival of the disasters and conflicts of the years between 1280 and 1480.

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