

A literary invention: the Etruscan myth in early Renaissance Florence

ERIK SCHOONHOVEN

The international rediscovery of Etruscan civilization can be dated to the rise of 'etruscheria' in the eighteenth century.¹ But the presence of the Etruscans was already felt in Italy during the Middle Ages through small reminders in the landscape and architecture of central Italy. Elements of their buildings were incorporated into new constructions, while fragments of their sculpture was found in rural burial sites. What is more, the rapid expansion of towns in the late Middle Ages ensured that many antiquities once again saw the light of day.² And in spite of the lengthy and well-known records describing the Etruscan wars with Rome that were penned by Livy, Virgil and Pliny the Elder,³ it was not until the efforts of Leonardo Bruni that the Etruscan past began to participate in political and cultural ideologies. This usage would reach a high point with the Medici dukes and grand dukes, who combined biblical and classical history into an effective and propagandistic display of Tuscan superiority.

The development of the Etruscan myth during the Florentine Renaissance has been the lifelong object of study for Giovanni Cipriani. His *Il mito etrusco nel rinascimento fiorentino*⁴ must inevitably be the starting point for any research into Tuscany's Etruscan heritage from the fourteenth century onwards. Cipriani's main focus ranges from Leonardo Bruni to the Medici era and is based primarily on historiographic sources. Despite his meticulously executed research, it is in the rise of the myth where a revision of the political and cultural heritage of the Etruscans is needed. This mainly concerns Cipriani's assertion that the first signs of the Etruscan myth can be detected in the work of Giovanni Villani. Instead, it will be suggested here that Giovanni Boccaccio should be considered the founding father of the Etruscan myth; a myth that

I would like to express my gratitude to Scott Nethersole, Christopher Kleinhenz, Karin Tilmans, Peter Hoppenbrouwers and Ronald de Rooij for their assistance in writing this article.

¹ Regarding the European rediscovery of the Etruscan myth, an exhaustive study has been published by Mauro Cristofani, *La scoperta degli etruschi. Archeologia e antiquaria nel '700* (Rome: Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, 1983). The development of the archaeological discipline as well as cultural influences has been documented in *Gli Etruschi e l'Europa* (Milan: Fabbri Editore, 1992).

² Michael Greenhalgh, *Donatello and his Sources* (London: Duckworth, 1982) 1–30.

³ Gabriele Morolli, 'Vetus Etruria', *il mito degli Etruschi nella letteratura architettonica nell'arte e nella cultura da Vitruvio a Winckelmann* (Florence: Alinea Editrice 1985) 17–30.

⁴ Giovanni Cipriani, *Il mito etrusco nel rinascimento fiorentino* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1980).

is notably absent in the writing of Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), suggesting that it was unknown at his time.

DEFINING THE ETRUSCAN PAST

During the fourteenth century, the Etruscan myth slowly crawled into the cultural consciousness of Tuscany. In his *Nuova Cronica*, Giovanni Villani (c. 1280–1348) describes the period from prehistory to the destruction of Fiesole by the Romans in 72 BC. With Livy's *Ab urbe condita* as his primary source, Villani recounts the history of the Tuscan King Porsenna, who fought against Latin predominance but eventually lost his empire to the Romans. According to Cipriani, the *Cronica* presents the Etruscans as indigenous and independent neighbours to the Romans. He demonstrates a regionalism ('Etruria' and 'Tuscia') that surpasses the communal concerns so typical of medieval Tuscany, which can also be deduced from the absence of ancient history in Dino Compagni's *Cronica*.⁵

From the first appearance of the myth in Villani, Cipriani takes a giant leap into the later fourteenth century. He discusses Coluccio Salutati's letter to the city of Perugia, dated 19 July 1383, in which the Florentine chancellor evokes their shared and glorious Etruscan past in creating an argument for coalition in the wars against Milan. The image Salutati generates is not only of a Roman Florence, but also an Etruscan Florence, keen to restore the splendour and importance of the ancient Tuscans. Salutati compares the Florentine struggle against Milanese tyranny to the Etruscans, who themselves once resisted Roman colonization. The battle was as much rhetorical, as it was military, as is evident in the *Invectiva*⁶ of the Milanese chancellor Antonio Loschi (1368–1441). In this epistle, Loschi points out the fiction of the Florentine claim to Roman descent. Cino Rinuccini (c. 1350–1417) and Salutati reply by denying the accusation and once more emphasize the superiority of the Florentines in their strife against tyranny. Again their Etruscan roots are employed as an argument: for the origins of Florence can be traced back to Etruscan Fiesole, long before the republican Lucius Cornelius Sulla (138–78 BC) and his soldiers were believed to have founded the city on the river Arno.⁷

Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444), Salutati's successor as chancellor of the Florentine republic, played a vital role in defining the Etruscan past. He evaluated the ancients, considering the establishment of the Roman Empire as marking the end of the republic.⁸ But Bruni himself lived in difficult times. He was witness to wars, political instability, Florentine expansion and the ideo-

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

⁶ Written right after the end of the war in March 1397.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2–5. See also Ronald G. Witt's *Cino Rinuccini's Risponsiva alla Invettiva di Messer Antonio Losco*, in *Renaissance Quarterly* 23 (1970), 133–49.

⁸ Eric Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 8.

logical collapse of the Roman curia. It is perhaps not surprising that the concept of political freedom was the corner stone of his thinking, as is evident in the *Historiae Florentini Populi Libri XII*. His history starts with the long forgotten Etruscans, replacing the teleological vision in which the Roman republic is precursory to the *pax romana* in which Christianity was established. He also puts an end to the foundation theories of Florence that were based in myth, by abandoning the Trojan thesis in favour of a hypothesis that Sulla founded the city. Although Villani and Bruni both used the same source, that is to say Livy, the resulting works are antonymic. Whilst Bruni was able to reinterpret such an anti-Etruscan account into a history that looked favourably on ancient Tuscan history, Villani was incapable of liberating himself from the Roman bias. With parts of Tuscany growing into a new unity under Florentine leadership during Bruni's lifetime, it became possible to see the city as a new Rome at the heart of an Italian empire based in old Etruria. This powerful combination brought together Etruscan freedom and culture with Roman virtues and unity.⁹

THE ETRUSCAN PEOPLE IN THE *HISTORIAE FLORENTINI POPULI*

According to Bruni, the Etruscans originated from Lydia. They sailed in large numbers to Italy, where they chased off the Pelasgians and other indigenous peoples, calling the land Tyrrhenia, after their king Tyrrhenus.¹⁰ Both the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic seas were thus named after the Etruscans. Their people existed of twelve tribes (a sacred number) under the leadership of a king, with a magistrate, called Lucumone, who presided over every tribe. They were, even before the arrival of the Trojans, very powerful.¹¹ Many Roman religious and political symbols and rites are indeed Etruscan. Before Greek literature became fashionable, the now extinct Etruscan literature was taught to the Roman youth. Etruscan religious ceremonies were adopted, because the Etruscan religion was deemed superior, while in Roman stately affairs, Etruscan soothsayers were consulted. In warfare, the Etruscans were fearsome enemies with the first battle between the two states being started by Romulus himself. Almost all Roman kings went to war against the Etruscans.¹² Bruni recounts exhaustively the ongoing conflicts that eventually saw the Etruscans lose, when under leadership of the legendary king Porsenna of Chiusi.¹³

⁹ Leonardo Bruni, *History of the Florentine People*, ed. and trans. James Hankins, (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, The I Tatti Renaissance Library, 2001), ix–xxi; Hans Baron, *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism. Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought*, Vol. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 43–93.

¹⁰ The name Etruscans derives from their Greek name.

¹¹ The Adriatic Sea is named after the Etruscan port city, Adria. Already Aeneas asked the Etruscans to help him in his wars against the Latins.

¹² Except for Numa Pompilius (8th–7th century BC) and Tarquinius Superbus (d. 496 BC).

¹³ Bruni, *History of the Florentine People*, cit., pp. 18–33. Leonardo Aretino, *Istoria fiorentina*, traduzione in volgare da Donato Acciajuoli, Vol. I (Florence: Felice le Monnier, 1855).

Etruscan civilization was, for Bruni, the religious, political and literary mother of Rome. Situated at the heart of the Etruscan empire, Tuscany was in the centre of twelve free city states that fought against Roman domination and expansion. Bruni clearly identified the Florentine state as the modern successor to ancient Etruria. Indeed, by 1450, the glorious past of the Etruscans was well known in all Italy.¹⁴

THE RISE OF MEDICI POWER

Despite the ideological significance of the ancient Etruscans, it was during the rise of Cosimo the Elder (1389–1464) that excavations unearthed their art. Having become the political heirs of Etruria, the Florentines now inherited the artistic legacies of their ancient forefathers. It has been argued that Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472)¹⁵, Donatello (1386–1466)¹⁶, and Antonio del Pollaiuolo (1429–1498), among others, responded to these new discoveries.¹⁷

The ideal of the Etruscan free cities with their Lucumones did not accord with the absolutist ambitions of the Medici. The monarchic symbol of King Porsenna of Chiusi was more appropriate and so he became a central element in their ideology. The Medici had become the new guardians of Florentine freedom, the heirs of Etruscan virtue and Roman power. The prestige of the Etruscan past, however, triumphed as a mechanism for ennobling their traditions. Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449–1492) knew Etruscan antiquities well: the famous Aretine vases and other artefacts were incorporated in his collection and he demanded all important new finds.¹⁸ In the interim, the foundation of Florence was subject to a new hypothesis, which speculated that it had been established during the second triumvirate of Augustus. The new ideology emphasized the noble and imperial character of the city under Medici power. With the death of Lorenzo, the expulsion of the Medici and the Savonarolan interlude, public life in Florence changed drastically and interest in the Etruscan past diminished.¹⁹

In 1498, Annio da Viterbo (1432–1502) published his *Antiquitates*. Besides his many theological, astrological and prophetic activities, this Dominican had a special taste for antiquities. Without paying much attention to the

¹⁴ Cipriani, *Il mito etrusco*, cit., 6–12.

¹⁵ Alberti describes the famous sepulchre of King Porsenna at Chiusi in his *De re aedificatoria*.

¹⁶ Donatello worked as an archaeological humanist, both in Rome and in Tuscany.

¹⁷ For the influences of Etruscan art on the Quattrocento see Michael Greenhalgh, *Donatello and his sources*, cit.; Gabriele Morolli, 'Vetus Etruria', cit., 61–75; C. C. van Essen, 'Elementi etruschi nel Rinascimento toscano', in *Studi Etruschi*, XIII, 1939, 497–9; Phyllis Pray Bober & Ruth Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists & Antique Sculpture. A Handbook of Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 42; and Fritz Weege, *Etruskische Malevei* (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1921); André Chastel, *Art et humanisme à Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981), 63–71.

¹⁸ Morolli, "Vetus Etruriae", cit., 77–8.

¹⁹ Despite the minimized attention for the Etruscan past, Pietro del Riccio Baldi (1475–1507), better known as Crinitus, publishes his *Commentari de honesta disciplina* (1504) advancing the Etruscan religiosity drawing a parallel between Antiquity and Savonarolan times.

truthfulness of his work, he reconstructed several Greek, Latin, pseudo-Etruscan and Longobard inscriptions. While the *Antiquitates* contains fragments of antique works, some are forgeries of his hand. In his history of Viterbo and Etruria he gave Tuscany a cultural and religiously superior status, equal to that of the Holy Land and the Roman Empire. He claimed that, after the deluge, Noah had settled in Italy and adopted the name of Janus (Vertumno in Etruscan), where he and his descendants established their culture, religion and cities. Although the quality of his work came to be doubted during the sixteenth century, the legend remained popular, particular under the reign of Cosimo I de' Medici (1519–1574).²⁰

ROMAN-ETRUSCAN LEO X

The Medici family returned to power in the early sixteenth century, in Florence as well as in Rome, with the election of Giovanni de' Medici (1475–1521) as Pope Leo X in 1513. He had always shown a keen interest in the Etruscans, having grown up with his father's collection of Etruscan art. As a young man he participated in various excavations in Arezzo. With Florence and Rome under Medici control the old ties between Etruria and Rome were renewed, and once again attention was focused on the Etruscan past. The myth became a central element in Medici propaganda, to which the description of the festivities for the conferral of Roman citizenship on Giuliano (1490–1516) and Lorenzo de' Medici (1492–1519) in 1513 bears testament.²¹ A theatre built on the Capitoline Hill was decorated with scenes of the Etruscan-Roman past.²² The glory of the Etruscans and the Romans was combined with ornaments of Leo X, such as the lion and the diamond ring. The Florentine pope brought the Etruscan past right in the political heart of ancient Rome.²³

Between 1513 and 1518 Cardinal Giles of Viterbo (1469–1532), protégé of Leo X, published his *Historia viginti saeculorum*. A world history, it situated the origin of the Etruscans not in Lydia, but in the biblical land of astronomers and religious cults, Chaldea. Such a relocation associated ancient cults and sacred mysteries with the Etruscans.²⁴ This idea is evident in the choice of imagery employed for the triumphal entrance of Leo X into Florence in 1515.

²⁰ Mauro Cristofani, *Il dizionario illustrato della civiltà etrusca* (Firenze: Giunti, 1999), 12.

²¹ Cipriani, *Il mito etrusco*, cit., 43–9. Janet Cox-Rearick, *Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art. Pontormo, Leo X and the Two Cosimo*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 97–100.

²² Depicting the Etruscan help given to Aeneas in the foundation of Rome. King Porsenna and the superior Etruscan religion are placed next to Jupiter and Romulus while Etruscan Tarquinius ruled as king of Rome.

²³ The description of the festivities can be found in Paolo Palliolo Fanese, *Le feste per conferimento del patriziato romano a Giuliano e Lorenzo de' Medici* (Bologna: Gaetano Romagnoli, 1885).

²⁴ It was in this ancient time that the twelve Etruscan cities were founded. Noah, Janus and Jason lived contemporaneously, while Hercules was present in Tuscany and was compared to Samson, being glorified as conqueror and distributor of religion. In fact, Hercules is one of the Greek gods incorporated in Etruscan religion (see the lemma 'Herclé' in Cristofani, *Dizionario illustrato*, cit., pp. 135–136). A. Collins, 'The Etruscans

This imagery celebrated the Etruscan and Roman past, as much as hailing the pope as the renovator of Florence. The ‘celebrazione familiare’ of Medici power was manifest in Etruscan potency, the monarchic myth of Porsenna, the imperial foundation of Florence and the close ties between Rome and Florence. The superiority of the Etruscans justified Medici absolutism, vivifying their aim to restore the grandeur of Florence. It was in this spirit that – a year after the election of Giulio de’ Medici (1478–1534) as Pope Clemens VII – Giovan Pietro Bolzani (1477–1560) published his *Dialogo della volgar lingua* (1524). In it, he claimed that Tuscan culture was autonomous and independent; it was, for him, the oldest and most famous in the world and had influenced the Greeks and Romans. For that reason the Tuscan (read ‘Florentine’) language was the most noble among the Italian dialects. It was therefore the only language worthy of the Roman curia and, indeed, all of Italy.

MAGNI DUCES ETRURIAE

During the turbulent years that anticipated the elevation of Cosimo to Duke of Florence in 1537 the Etruscan myth lost some of its prominence.²⁵ His installation, however, prompted a new flourishing. Especially in the circle of the Accademia fiorentina much attention was given to renewed speculations on the glorious past of Tuscany.²⁶ The writings of Annio and Giles of Viterbo inspired Pier Francesco Giambullari (1495–1555), Giambattista Gelli (1498–1563) and Guillaume Postel (1510–1581) in their works on Florentine history and language. Gelli’s *Trattatello dell’Origine di Firenze* (1542–45) followed the Viterbese example with Noah as Janus and Hercules as founder of Florence. Despite the limited circulation of the *Trattatello*, it was familiar to his friend Giambullari, who named his linguistic treatise, the *Gello*, after him.²⁷ In their opinion, Etruscan writing was Aramese and Janus and Noah were identical. The majority of Tuscan names was not of Latin but of Etruscan derivation, while Atalante, founder of Fiesole and grandfather of Dardan (the founder of the Trojan empire), had left his marks in Tuscany, just as Hercules had done. Tuscany was, they argued, named after his son Tusco. One of Hercules’s deeds was to claim the Arno valley where he founded Florence. ‘Arno’ was considered to be the Aramese word for lion skin, his attribute. In freeing the Tuscan

in the Renaissance: The Sacred Destiny of Rome and the “Historia Viginti Saeculorum” of Giles of Viterbo (c. 1469–1532)’, in *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (1998), 337–65.

²⁵ Cipriani, *Il mito etrusco*, cit., 52–60.

²⁶ Marcello Fantoni, *La corte del granduca. Forma e simboli del potere mediceo fra Cinque e Seicento* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1994), 40–42.

²⁷ S. Bertelli, ‘Firenze, la Toscana e le origini “aramcee” dell’etrusco’, in *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e filosofia, Università di Siena*, Vol. II (1981), (Firenze: Olschki, 1981), 199–207.

land of its tyrants, Hercules had brought peace. Cosimo I could, then, legitimate his expansion politics by identifying himself with Hercules.²⁸

Guillaume Postel, the French humanist, orientalist and mystic, had familiarized himself with the works of Giles and Annio of Viterbo as a student. In 1549 he wrote in his *De Etruriae regionis*²⁹ how, in the wake of the deluge, the Etruscan people followed Noah-Janus out of Assyria to settle in Tuscany. The descendents of Noah spread throughout Europe, but Tuscany always remained the heartland of this holy people. As improbable as this theory may be, it lent biblical sanction to Cosimo's political ambitions.³⁰

Between 1555 and 1560, with Florentine power expanding towards Siena, Cosimo's propagandistic use of the Etruscan myth reached its apogee.³¹ After 1560, however, his interest dwindled, mainly because a trip to Rome realigned his focus in that direction. The idea of Etruria is entirely absent from the Sala Grande of the Palazzo Vecchio;³² in 1565, it was similarly lacking from the *apparato* on the occasion of the marriage of his son Francesco (1541–1587) to Johanna of Austria (1547–1578). But in one allegorical painting in the Sala Grande the province of Tuscany was shown as Lady Province sitting on a throne, wearing the grand ducal robes. Beside her stood a king smashing a crown, alluding to the fall of King Porsenna's empire. Cosimo, sporting a crown, was placed beside them, suggesting that he had mended Porsenna's failure.³³ Under Cosimo I, the Etruscan myth served mainly to reinforce Medici rule of Tuscany, control over which had been his personal ambition.³⁴ In public displays, he always stressed the supremacy of Florence, rather than

²⁸ Marlis von Hessert, *Zur Bedeutungswandel der Herkules-Figur in Florenz. Von den Anfängen der Republik bis zum Prinzipat Cosimos I* (Köln, Weimar & Wien: Böhlcr Verlag, 1991), 96–100. Also the expansion towards Siena was justified with the Etruscan myth: Mauro Cristofani, 'Linee di una storia del "revival" etrusco in Toscana nel XVI secolo', in *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia*, cit., 195–8. Furthermore, the lion is an Etruscan symbol *par excellence*. W. Llewellyn Brown, *The Etruscan Lion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960).

²⁹ The complete title is *De Etruriae regionis quae prima in orbe Europaeo habitata est originibus, institutis, religione et moribus et in primis de aevi saeculi doctrina et vita praestantissima quae in divinationis sacrae usu posita est*. The work was published in 1551 by Lorenzo Torrentino, Florence.

³⁰ Guillaume Postel, *De Etruriae regionis originibus, institutis, religione et moribus*, edited by Giovanni Cipriani (Roma: Consiglio nazionale delle ricerche, 1986), 11–23; Cesare Vasoli, *La cultura delle corti* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1980), 190–218; Cipriani, *Il mito etrusco*, cit., 89–96.

³¹ Numerous references to Etruria are incorporated in the Quartiere degli Elementi in the Palazzo della Signoria in Florence and also in the *apparato* for the entrance of Cosimo and Eleonora of Toledo in 1560. It is also in these years that Cosimo focuses his art-collecting on the Etruscans, with the high point being in 1559, when he put a bronze and stone Etruscan Minerva in his *scrittoio* in the Palazzo della Signoria.

³² Apart from the 'SPQF OPTIMO PRINCIPE CONSTITVTVA CIVITATE AVCTO IMPERIO PACATA ETRVRIA' written around the *Apoteosi* in the ceiling.

³³ Matteo Casini, *I gesti del principe. La festa politica a Firenze e Venezia in età rinascimentale* (Venezia: Saggi Marsilio, 1996), 229–33.

³⁴ After the conquest of Siena, the elevation as grand dukes of Tuscany ('Magnus Dux Etruriae'), the imperial recognition of the title in 1576, at births of heirs and the burial of Cosimo. Also the unique crown of the Grand duchy of Tuscany has an Etruscan programme, referring to the archetype of the royal crown and of monarchy itself, which according to the Etruscan myth was brought to Etruria from the Orient. Giovanni Cipriani, 'La corona granducale medicea: araldica e filologia nella Toscana del Cinquecento', in: *L'araldica, fonti e metodi*, Atti del convegno internazionale di Campiglia Marittima (6–8 marzo 1987), (Firenze: Giunta regionale toscana La mandragora, 1989), 40–43.

the Tuscan state. But from 1560, his propaganda shifted back to city and republic.³⁵ The generations succeeding Cosimo, the *Magni Duces Etruriae*, maintained the Etruscan myth and so in large part Cipriani's book *Il mito etrusco nel rinascimento fiorentino* is dedicated to the grand dukes of Etruria.³⁶

RETURN TO THE ORIGINS

The rise of the Etruscan myth in Florence during the Renaissance demonstrates the search for an identity that could be adapted and applied to various political situations. According to Cipriani, the process of mystification of the Tuscan past began with Giovanni Villani's *Nuova Cronica*, who treated the Etruscans independently from the Romans. But Villani's attitude to the Etruscans is blighted by one major problem: the lack of both the terms 'Etruscan' and 'Etruria'. They are, by contrast, in use at the end of the fourteenth century in the writings of Salutati, Bruni, and others. Furthermore, the term 'Etruria' is present in Livy's work, the primary source for all Trecento historians. There was no need to invent an Etruscan identity, it was simply a matter of copying the term. A close reading of Villani, however, suggests that the idea of Etruria was not yet current: he wrote about 'Toscana' and not 'Etruria'. The Etruscans are absent in his account of the foundation of Florence, which was built in 70 BC by decree of Julius Caesar (100–44 BC), while Fiesole was founded, as was Rome, by the Trojans. Even Cortona, the famous Etruscan city, was thought by Villani to have been founded in the time of the Latin Janus. When writing about Arezzo, he mentioned the famous vases, without recognizing them as Etruscan. Villani's work shows that the Tuscan history is derived from and subordinate to Roman culture. Although the potency of King Porsenna 'of Tuscany' is one of the topics in his book, the concept of 'Etruria' is absent and the roots of important Etruscan cities like Fiesole and Cortona are considered Latin.³⁷ According to Hans Baron, the Etruscan past of the Tuscans was never properly forgotten, but was instead surpassed by the fame of Rome as a political and cultural mother for Italy. Baron states that the Tuscans deliberately assisted to the *damnatio memoriae* of the Etruscan past by incorporating Trojan-Latin history. Dante's opinion that noble Roman blood was contaminated by the Etruscan, serves Baron as an example of this attitude to Tuscan history.³⁸ It would seem that Baron applied Dante's idea of the Florentine blood being contaminated by Fiesole as an opinion evident in Florence around 1300.

³⁵ Henk van Veen, *Cosimo de' Medici, Vorst en Republikein* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1998), 162–4.

³⁶ For more information on the Etruscan myth after Cosimo I see, besides Cipriani's *Il mito etrusco*, also *Gli Etruschi e l'Europa*, cit., and Cristofani, *La scoperta degli Etruschi*, cit.

³⁷ Giovanni Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, Letteratura Italiana Einaudi, CD-ROM, 1–44.

³⁸ Hans Baron, *In search of Florentine Civic Humanism, Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought*, Vol. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 53.

DANTE AND THE ETRUSCANS

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) was unequivocal about the Roman roots of Florence, the ‘most beautiful and most famous daughter of Rome’.³⁹ In *Inferno* XV, Brunetto Latini calls the Florentines ‘that ungrateful, that malignant folk/ Which formerly came down from Fiesole,/ And still is grained of mountain and hewn rock’.⁴⁰ Dante referred to the then current legend that Florence was founded after the destruction of Fiesole by the Romans in retaliation for the protection the Etruscan city offered to Lucius Sergius Catilina (108–62 BC), who had been a conspirator against the Roman Republic and was one of Sulla’s henchman. After the destruction of Fiesole, Roman colonists together with the remaining inhabitants of Fiesole descended into the Arno valley and established the new city, Florence.⁴¹ The poet used the story to illustrate the fact that unjustness in the character of the Florentines had ancient roots.⁴² *Paradiso* XV 124–26 similarly shows that the foundation of Florence as a tripartite process, beginning with the founding of Rome by the Trojans and the destruction of Fiesole by the Romans.⁴³

Inferno XV once more confirms the negative opinion that Brunetto Latini has of the Florentines: ‘Let Fiesole’s wild beasts scratch up their sour/ Litter themselves from their rank native weed,/ Nor touch the plant, if any such can flower// Upon their midden, in whose sacred seed/ Survives the Roman line left there to dwell/ When this huge nest of vice [i.e., Florence, ES] began to breed’.⁴⁴ In his *Convivio* Dante explained how the divine election of the Roman empire is proven by the coincidence of the birth of king David with the foundation of Rome by the Trojans. God himself chose glorious Rome as the empire in which the birth of his own son would take place.⁴⁵

Already in antiquity the Etruscans were famous for their soothsayers. In *Inferno* XX 46, Dante named the famous Etruscan wizard Aruns (first century BC),⁴⁶ who, according to Lucanus’ *Pharsalia*, predicted the victory of Caesar

³⁹ *Convivio* I, iii, 4: ‘la bellissima e famosissima figlia di Roma’. Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, ed. Giorgio Inglese (Milan: RCS Libri, 2004), 50.

⁴⁰ *Inferno* XV 61–63: ‘Ma quello ingrato popolo maligno/ che discese di Fiesole ab antico,/ e tiene ancor del monte e del macigno’. Dante Alighieri, *Commedia, Volume primo, Inferno*, with commentary by Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (Milan: Mondadori, 2006). English translation by Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine, Cantica I, Hell <L’Inferno>* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971).

⁴¹ Either Giovanni Villani (*Cronica* I 38) as well as Brunetto Latini (*Tesoro* I 37, 1–2) recount this legend.

⁴² Dante, *Inferno*, cit., 465.

⁴³ *Par.* XV 124–126: ‘One, with her spindle dancing on the floor,/ Her children round her, would spin yarns enow/ Of Troy and Rome and Fiesole of yore.’

⁴⁴ *Inf.* XV 73–78: ‘Faccian le bestie fiesolane strame/ di lor medesme, e non tocchin la pianta,/ s’alcuna surge ancora in lor letame,/ in cui riviva la sementa santa/ di que’ Roman che vi rimaser quando/ fu fatto il nido di malizia tanta’.

⁴⁵ *Convivio* IV, v.

⁴⁶ Also the *Intelligenza* speaks of Aruns. In the stanzas 104 ff. the poet recounts the episode of his prediction of the war. *Poemetti del Duecento*, ed. Giuseppe Petronio (Torino: UTET, 1951), 426.

over Pompeius.⁴⁷ In *Monarchia* and *Paradiso* there are three references to King Porsenna of Chiusi. The last Etruscan king of Rome, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus (died 498 BC), was deposed by his people. Tarquinius and Porsenna decided to lay siege to Rome together. In *Monarchia*, Dante refers twice to this siege and names Porsenna explicitly.⁴⁸ In *Paradiso* IV 84, Dante refers to the episode of Gaius Mucius Scaevola (7th–6th century BC) who, during the siege, entered Porsenna's camps with the intention to kill him. He failed to do so, was held in captivity and subsequently led before Porsenna. To show his bravery to the Etruscan king he put his right hand in a fire. The king admired Mucius for his courage and released him to return to Rome to start peace negotiations. And so the siege ended. Dante also referred to this particular episode in Roman history in *Monarchia* (II, v, 14).

The references to Etruscan history in Dante's work show that the Etruscans were not identified as a distinct people. Words like 'Etruria', and other variants, are absent: the people that lived next to the Romans for centuries are not defined as a distinct entity in his work.⁴⁹ Such a lack of Etruscan consciousness is astonishing since one of his sources, the *Ab urbe condita* of Livy, recounts extensively the long wars between the Romans and the Etruscans. Both the words 'Etruria' and 'etruscorum' are widespread throughout Livy.⁵⁰

The references to the Etruscan inhabitants of Fiesole are utterly negative compared to the fame attributed to the Romans. This negative evaluation of native Tuscan elements are clearly visible in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, in which he consequently referred to 'Tuscia' instead of 'Etruria', the common Latin word for the Tuscan land. He considered the Tuscan dialects as inferior to almost all the dialects of the Italian peninsula. No sense of superiority, of 'toscanità', is present in his works. Many other cities and regions were more pleasant than Tuscany and Florence, while numerous people had a much more pleasant and useful language than the Italians.⁵¹ According to Dante,

⁴⁷ Chiavacci calls Luni an Etruscan city. This is incorrect. She refers to Luni at the river Magra which was founded by the Romans in 177 BC. The other Luni, in Latium, indeed was an Etruscan city, but not the Luni in Dante. Dante, *Inferno*, cit., 605.

⁴⁸ *Monarchia* II, iv, 10: 'Nonne transitus Clelie mirabilis fuit, cum mulier cumque captive, in obsidione Porsenne, abruptis vinculis, miro Dei auxilio adiuta, transnavit Tyberim, sicut omnes fere scribe romane rei ad glorium ipsius commemorant?'. *Monarchia* II, v, 14: 'Quid non audendum pro patria nobis Mutius persuasit cum incautum Porsennam invasit, cum deinde manum errantem, non alio vultu quam si hostem cruciari videret, suam adhuc, cremari aspiciebat?'. Dante Alighieri, *Opere minori*, Vol. II, eds. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo et al. (Milano & Napoli: Ricciardi Editore, 1979), 239–503, 386 and 392.

⁴⁹ A hidden presence of the Etruscans in his work is the figure Charon in *Inferno*. The demon as presented by Dante has an Etruscan equivalent called 'Charun' who was also known to Virgil. Ronnie H. Terpening, *Charon and the Crossing. Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance Transformations of a Myth* (London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1985), 14–15, 85n, 86n.

⁵⁰ <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/livy>.

⁵¹ *De Vulgari Eloquentia* I, vi, 3: '[...] multas esse perpendimus firmiterque censemus et magis nobiles et magis delitiosas et regiones et urbes quam Tusciam et Florentiam, unde sumus oriundus et civis, et plerasque nationes et gentes delectabiliiori atque utiliori sermone uti quam Latinos.', Dante, *Opere minori*, cit., 52.

the Tuscans, with an infantile insanity, considered their language the noblest in existence. The *volgare* Dante was looking for could not possibly be Tuscan.⁵²

The absence of a notion of 'Tuscany' is characteristic of Italian poetry of the thirteenth century, but a pejorative attitude towards Tuscany became a personal motivation of Dante's work. The most poignant example can be found in *Inferno* XX 82–85, where Dante deliberately denied the Etruscan roots of the city of Mantua. In this assertion, he denied the authority of Virgil, who in his *Aeneas* wrote of the Etruscan history of this city.⁵³ According to Virgil, and also Pliny the Elder, Mantua was founded by the Etruscan hero Ocno, whose father was the Etruscan stream god. The city of Mantua was named after his mother, Manto.⁵⁴ In *Inferno* XX, Dante created a literary game in which the great master 'corrects' his own work and contradicts himself at the same time. Considering that Manto, as well as Aruns, are placed in the circle of hell reserved for magicians, Dante's choice for Isidore of Seville's version of the account – who attributed the foundation to the Theban magician Manto – does not seem illogical.⁵⁵ But the fact remains that Dante ignored the *auctoritas* of at least two classical authors, while in *Inferno* XXVIII 12 he affirmed the infallibility of that other *auctoritas*, Livy.⁵⁶

The negative opinion in which Dante held the Tuscan past is the result of a deeply personal antipathy to Tuscany, Florence and their inhabitants. There is, of course, plenty of biographical evidence to substantiate his views. This negative opinion was elaborated by Dante in a highly literary way in the *Divina Commedia*. As such, Baron's opinion to the alleged *damnatio memoriae* does not seem valid. The negative appreciation of the Etruscan past seems more the result of an extremely positive appreciation of the Roman past. The identification of Tuscany with Etruria lay in the future, and it seems that a Latin-centred world and the lack of awareness regarding the Etruscan past led to something that looks like a well-organized *damnatio memoriae*, but in reality is not.

⁵² *De Vulgari Eloquentia* I xiii 1: 'Post hec veniamus ad Tuscos, qui propter amentiam suam inforniti titulum sibi vulgaris illustris arrogare videntur'. Ook I xiii 5: 'Itaque si tuscanas examinemus loquelas, et pensemus qualiter viri prehonorati a propria diverterunt, non restat in dubio quin alius sit vulgare quod querimus quam quod actingit populus Tuscanorum.' Zie ook I, xiii 2 en 4. Dante, *Opere minori*, cit., 106–11.

⁵³ Simon A. Gilson, *Dante and Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 88–90. The history of Mantua was known to Dante through various other works of classical authors. More information on Virgil and the Etruscans can be found in W. F. Jackson Knight, *Roman Vergil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966).

⁵⁴ *Aeneis* X 198. According to Mauro Cristofani, the city was named after the Etruscan god Mantus. Several accounts of the foundation of Mantua are in existence. Maurus Servius Honoratius (4th century AD), in his commentary on the *Aeneis*, states that the city was founded by the Etruscan hero Tarcon, son or brother of Tyrrhenus, the mythical founder of the twelve Etruscan cities. Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636) attributes the foundation to the Theban magician Manto. Mauro Cristofani, *Dizionario illustrato della civiltà etrusca* (Florence: Giunti, 1999), 163, 193 and 285. Dante, *Inferno*, cit., 606 and 612.

⁵⁵ See note 55.

⁵⁶ 'Come Livio scrive, che non erra'.

The attitude of the early Trecento towards the Etruscan past undermines Cipriani's claim that the Etruscan myth appears for the first time in Villani's *Nuova Cronica*. In his book, Cipriani proceeds from Villani to Salutati, skipping over more than half a century. The explicit reference to Etruria in Salutati's letter would make him the one to have introduced this word for the first time since antiquity. But since Cipriani only studied historical sources, he did not take in account one of the most important writers of that age, who served as an example to Salutati, Bruni and many other humanist scholars.

Giovanni Boccaccio, in his literary works of around 1340, introduced the word 'Etruria' as a sign of his increasing consciousness of the Tuscan past. In his *Filocolo*, written in 1336, he recounted the adventures of two lovers separated from each other. Here, he referred to Chiusi, where King Porsenna 'had his realm obey him by force'.⁵⁷ Etruria is mentioned for the first time in the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, the comedy of the Florentine nymphs (1339–40). Etruria is described as a paradise in the midst of the most beautiful and sacred land, Italy:

In Italy, illustrious splendour among earthly places, there lies Etruria, which is, I believe, the principal site and singular beauty of this region. In this place, rich in cities, filled with noble people, adorned with infinite castles, delightful for its gracious villas, and abundant in bountiful fields, from its plains – and almost in the centre and most prosperous part of its blessed bosom – a fertile mount rises toward the stars, called Corythus by the ancients before Atlas, its first inhabitant, ascended there.⁵⁸

This comedy tells the story of Ameto, a coarse herdsman, who in an Etruscan forest meets nymphs dedicated to Venus and falls in love with one of them, Lia. The scene of the encounter is at Mount Corice, close to the banks of the river Arno, where the nymphs are bathing. They tell him several love stories which have a purging effect on his mind. The stories appear to be allegorical and the nymphs represent the virtues that changed this coarse and animal-like creature into human. The moment of Ameto's realization is when the beauty of Etruria enters the story.⁵⁹ Lia tells him about the Theban Achimeneide, companion of Ulisse. The god Mars announced him the foundation of a new

⁵⁷ '[...] Chiusi, ove già Porsenna [...] avea il suo regno con forze costretto ad ubidirsi.' Giovanni Boccaccio, *Filocolo*, Letteratura Italiana Einaudi, CD-ROM, 256.

⁵⁸ Giovanni Boccaccio, *L'Ameto*, trans. Judith Serafini-Sauli (New York: Garland, 1985), 5. 'In Italia, delle mondane parti chiarezza speciale, siede Etruria, die quella, sì com'io credo, principal membro e singular bellezza; nella quale, ricca di città, piena di nobili popoli, ornata d'infinite castella, dilettevole di graziose ville e di campi fruttieri copiosa, quasi nel suo mezzo e più felice parte del santo seno, inver le stelle dalle sue pianure si leva un fruttuoso monte, già dagli antichi Corito nominato, avanti che Atalante, primo di quello abitatore, su vi salisse.' Giovanni Boccaccio, *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, Letteratura Italiana Einaudi, CD-ROM, p. 6.

⁵⁹ 'If these maidens continue to come here, in a short while not only will all the beauty of Etruria be gathered here, but rather all that of the kingdom of Jove.' Boccaccio, *L'Ameto*, cit., 39. 'Se queste qui così di venire perseverano, in brieve la bellezza d'Etruria, ma più tosto tutta quella de' regni di Giove, ci fia raccolta [...]'. Boccaccio, *Comedia*, cit., 39.

Thebe in Etruria (Florence obviously).⁶⁰ The scenery described by Achimeneide is the Tuscan landscape and has a sacred character, full with temples dedicated to the gods.⁶¹ In his commentary to the *Divina Commedia*, Boccaccio is the first to doubt the legend of the Trojan foundation of Florence, thus opening the way to the Etruscan past.⁶²

The literary production of Boccaccio of around 1340 shows the first identification of Etruria as Tuscany. The Etruscan landscape is clearly situated in the Florentine area, recognizable by the topographic names of the rivers Arno and Mugnone. The typical elements of the Etruscan myth in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries appear for the first time in these works. The Florentine area is the ancient Etruria, with its mythical past prior to Rome's fame. The foundation of the Etruscan myth, so vital to republican Florence as well as to the Medici rulers, is the result of the work of Giovanni Boccaccio. His works served as an example to the humanists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. All vital elements of the Etruscan-Tuscan ideology expressed by Annio and Egidio of Viterbo, the Medici court and its intellectuals, can be traced back to the initiative of Boccaccio, who himself did not have Italian literary precursors after which to model this myth. With this powerful literary act, Giovanni Boccaccio became the father of Tuscan pride and identity, for he was the first to apply the Etruscan past to the Tuscan present.

University of Amsterdam

⁶⁰ Giuseppe Centonze, *Dal Sarno all'Arno, L'idronimo Sarnus da Virgilio a Sannazaro. Parte seconda. Dalle Cronache pisane al Boccaccio*, <http://www.stabiana.it/sarno2.htm>. Previously published in *Cultura e territorio*, VI, 1989, 121–45.

⁶¹ 'And after that, in Etruria, among a people most delightful to me, you will build walls and temples to our deity in that spot where your horse will halt with strong hoof and will dig the earth under a fruitful tree before my altars, which were constructed some time ago by Dardanus; and there you will renew the fallen Thebes in my services. [...] If this is Etruria, and if here are the altars consecrated by the pious Dardanus, you alone know.' Boccaccio, *L'Ameto*, cit., 122.

'[...] Dopo la quale, in Etruria, tra popoli a me molto grati, edificherai mura e templi alla deità nostra là dove il tuo cavallo, con forte unghione fermato, caverà la terra dinanzi a' miei altari sotto fruttifero albero, costrutti per adietro da Dardano, e quivi rinoverai la caduta Tebe ne' miei servigii. [...] Se questa è Etruria, se qui gli altari sacri dal pietoso Dardano sono, voi il sapete; [...]'. Boccaccio, *Comedia*, cit., 137. Other reference: 'Beautiful lady, unique flame of my spirit, I was born not very far from the place where your mother derived her origin, and as a child I sought the Tuscan realms; then, coming to a more mature age, from there I came here.' Boccaccio, *L'Ameto*, cit., 106. In this case Judith Serafini chose to translate 'etrurii' as 'Tuscan'. 'Bella donna, unico fuoco della mia mente, io, nato non molto lontano a' luoghi onde trasse origine la tua madre, fanciullo cercai i regni etrurii, e di quelli, in più ferma età venuto, qui venni.' Boccaccio, *Comedia*, cit., 119. Also references to Porsenna are present: 'I entered into a temple dedicated to the one who bore with his whole self what Mucius did with his own hand in the presence of Porsenna in order to ascend to the houses of the immortal gods.' Boccaccio, *L'Ameto*, cit., 109. '[...] io entrai in un tempio da colui ditto che per salire alle case degli iddii immortali tale di sé tutto sostenne quale Muzio, di Porsenna in presenza, della propria mano.' Boccaccio, *Comedia*, cit., 123. The *Amorosa visione* presents Porsenna as well (in canto IX v. 50 and XXXVII v. 16). A last occurrence of Etruria can be found in *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* (1343–1344): 'And he: "I have come from the region of Etruria, and from the most noble city in that region, and I am from there."' (translation by professor Christopher Kleinhenz). 'Ed egli: "Delle parti d'Etruria, e della più nobile città di quella vengo, e quindi sono."' Giovanni Boccaccio, *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, Letteratura Italiana Einaudi, CD-ROM, 150.

⁶² Baron, *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism*, cit., 55.