



Chapter 1

ITALY IN THE CLASSICAL WORLD

1 Prehistoric Italy

No other country in Europe can claim the continuity of civilization achieved in Italy. Greece had her moment of cultural and intellectual brilliance, but the history of Italy has shown a sustained development, falling occasionally into comparative backwardness, but always returning to peaks of civilized excellence. It is this sense of continuity that most strikes the foreigner, an impression that people have for long ages lived, worked and built in this narrow peninsula.

There has, in truth, been continuous human life since the Ice Age. An early species of man, *homo erectus*, was in Italy some half a million years ago, and our own species, *homo sapiens*, was present some quarter of a million years ago. Palaeolithic, or Old Stone Age, man lived in Italy in the last stage of the Ice Age, a stage more severe than earlier ones. The temperature of Italy at that time is thought to have been about nine degrees centigrade colder, in winter and in summer, than it is today. In winter there was snow over most of Italy for many months. The country was radically different in another sense. As the oceans had frozen, the Mediterranean had partly dried up. The seas of the world were at least 130 metres lower than they are now, which meant that Italy was an appreciably larger country, with the coastline being twenty or thirty kilometres farther out than it is now. The Po plain must have extended

Italy in the classical world

across what is now the Adriatic to Yugoslavia. These conditions prevailed about 16,000 years ago when Palaeolithic man was leaving his traces in caves and graves. The caves have left nothing to match the paintings of the Palaeolithic period at Lascaux in France or Altamira in Spain, but they have yielded up a wealth of stone tools and weapons, growing in sophistication as the millennia passed.

About 14,000 years ago the ice receded for the last time, and the generations of Mesolithic, or Middle Stone Age, man could adjust over the centuries to the new conditions which would enable the more accomplished Neolithic, or New Stone Age, man to emerge. Both Palaeolithic and Mesolithic men had been nomadic hunters, but with the Middle Stone Age the larger animals, for some reason, disappeared, and had to be replaced as nourishment by small animals, even rodents, or by fish when they were available. Mesolithic man settled in the wider areas which had not been inhabitable until the Ice Age receded, but in most respects the Middle Stone Age, which lasted until about 5000 BC was not marked by great developments.

A major social revolution occurred in the New Stone Age. Man ceased to be exclusively a hunter, and started to farm, to grow his own food. The next phase – some two and a half millennia later – was marked by the use of the first metal – copper – to replace stone in the making of tools and weapons. The Chalcolithic, or Copper, Age lasted for about half a millennium, and then, around 2000 BC, a more effective metal – bronze – gave its name to a new age in which mankind moved closer towards history.

Developments in the Bronze Age were sufficiently complex to justify sub-divisions into Early, Middle, Recent and Final. Here it will be enough to consider the last two of these ages and their transition into the Iron Age, the whole period, from about 1300 to 700 BC, taking us to the dawn of Italian history.

In these six centuries there was a growth of population which left more evidence of human existence than in the whole

Prehistoric Italy

previous span of human life on earth. For some reason there was a comparatively sudden demographic growth at about 1300 BC, which was then sustained from the Bronze Age into the Iron Age. In Italy the process was an accelerating one. More remains from the eighth century BC have been discovered than from the ninth. Yet remains in caves, as opposed to man-made shelters, declined from the later Bronze Age to the early Iron Age, showing that human society was not only increasing numerically, but changing its customs, perhaps its economy or religion, and certainly improving its living standards. In the course of the Bronze Age there had also been variations of population change. In the Recent and final Bronze Ages, while the overall population of Italy was increasing, villages in the Po Valley were diminishing in number. They may have disappeared because of some human-inspired disaster, since the village sites themselves give evidence of burnings or destruction. Perhaps some incoherent war which was an ancestor of all the wars which have been fought in the Po Valley since the Middle Ages was fought in the thirteenth century BC. Seen in this full chronological context the few centuries of comparative peace which Augustan Rome was to bring to the area must be considered a blessed freak of history.

In this same period the peoples of Italy were increasingly cultivating the fields in addition to pasturing livestock. They were even beginning to breed their own stock. They were ceasing altogether to be nomadic hunters, and becoming farmers. Agricultural advance can be assumed from the fact of a growing population, but there is also direct evidence, because primitive axes, chisels and saws of the period have been found. Evidently the forests were being felled. The bronze implements must also have been used for making wooden objects, which have themselves perished, but which would have been more likely to be used for agriculture than for hunting or tribal warfare, for which bronze weapons would have been more

Italy in the classical world

effective. Society was becoming more peaceful, less plagued by fear and hatred. And these societies of the Bronze and Early Iron Age were moving away from areas suitable for pasturing, to areas more suitable for arable farming.

In human terms an even more interesting development was taking place: small patriarchal units were broadening into larger communities, communities containing several families. The settlements were not only getting larger; they were also existing for longer periods – sometimes for several centuries. In particular there have been excavations of cemeteries which had been in use for long periods – periods of marked population growth. Individual communities which would have contained less than a hundred people in the Middle Bronze Age were beginning to have three-figure populations in the Recent Bronze Age. But there was one exception to the rule that settlements were tiny in earlier periods: in the Tavoliere district of Apulia a number of large villages from Neolithic times have been discovered. But on the whole nothing approaching a ‘village’ – a fortified community rather than a simple extended family – had existed until the second millennium BC. The large settlements of the Recent and Final Bronze Ages sometimes have recognizable centres with smaller settlements dependent upon them. In other words they were the seats of rudimentary political power, and from the objects they contained they were evidently ‘industrial centres’, in the sense that artefacts were made there for the wider community, and specialized artisans would presumably live there. In Sicily examples of such settlements with populations running into four figures have been excavated.

The growth in population and social organization is illustrated most clearly by the cemeteries and urnfields. In the patriarchal clan burial grounds of the Early and Middle Bronze Age a few important males were given dominant positions, often central positions in a tumulus, with lesser figures surrounding them. In the Recent and Final Bronze Ages much

Prehistoric Italy

larger groups of people, numbering hundreds or even thousands, were buried in single cemeteries. Whether these large settlements had anything approaching a fixed political organization, anything approaching a set of laws, is a matter of conjecture, but the very fact that many of them existed for long periods would seem to suggest that certain customs, even some kind of stable authority, were recognized. It would certainly be a mistake to assume that without a written language there could be no law. Yet there appear to have been no classes or hierarchies, or at least, no distinctions of rank or class were recognized in burial customs. Only with the eighth century BC, during the Early Iron Age, does a recognizable 'upper class' – probably a warrior class – become at all common.

With the Iron Age, during the first millennium BC, came the use not only of iron, but of glass and pottery, and pottery was finally fashioned on a wheel. In South-Central Italy the potter's wheel was used far earlier than elsewhere. The new products must have been exchanged for agricultural products, and metal used as capital and currency. The wealth of a family or village would presumably then be determined by its capital of either herds or metal, and as the Final Bronze Age merged into the Iron Age the hoards of metal became bigger, and metal evidently acquired greater importance as wealth. The metal hoards consisted of unworked metal, metal objects, and even deliberately broken metal objects, which were evidently kept in the hoards as capital wealth to be exchanged when needed.

Nothing has yet been said of cultural influences from outside Italy, a theme which must be more fully discussed in the next section. The Aegean civilization which influenced Italy in the Final Bronze and Iron Ages was that of Mycenae. The Minoan civilization, which must in several respects have been a strangely extrovert and liberated one, had flourished in Crete from about 3000 to 1100 BC, but about 1450 BC Crete had fallen under the control of the Mycenaeans from the Peloponnese. The Minoan script has never been deciphered, but the

Italy in the classical world

Mycenaean script is an early version of Greek. This early race of Greeks were some of the first maritime traders in history, going East to Cyprus and Anatolia, and West to Italy.

Mycenaean influence in Italy was already considerable in the Recent Bronze Age, before the fall of Mycenaean civilization in the twelfth century. Subsequently the Etruscans, who are to be a main theme of the next section, were to mix Mycenaean influences with those of the indigenous Iron Age culture of Villanova, a rich settlement near the site of the future city of Bologna. Local pottery, made on the wheel and painted, was to replace that imported from Mycenae.

The Iron Age stretched from prehistory into history, in the sense that some people in Italy were literate at the end of it. There is much to be said for the use of the term 'protohistory', coined by archaeologists, and meaning an intermediate period between history and prehistory. In Italy the first millennium BC might be termed a period of 'protohistory'. Within it Villanovan society was an advanced prehistoric one. With Etruscan civilization Italian history has started.

2 The Greeks, the Etruscans and the arrival of the Romans

The Mycenaean had traded with the peoples of Italy, and had influenced their art and their technology, but they had not settled. The first Greek settlement was made by the people of Euboea, the island to the east of Athens, and they chose a beautiful spot: Pithecusa (in Greek Pithekoussai) on the island of Ischia in the Bay of Naples. This was as early as the first decades of the eighth century BC, perhaps only a century or so after the Trojan War, and almost certainly before Homer's story had been recorded. The main function of Pithecusa was to be a trading post, and it must have developed into a cosmopolitan centre, since objects from Crete, Rhodes and even Syria and Egypt have been found there. In these early days the Greeks were going to Southern Italy to buy metal,

Greeks, Etruscans and the arrival of the Romans

especially iron, ore. From Pithecusa the Euboeans founded further colonies, first immediately opposite, on the mainland of Cumae, and then in Sicily. The modern towns of Catania and Messina in Eastern Sicily, and on the mainland, Reggio Calabria, date from these first Greek colonies. The people of Corinth were also trading in these regions in ceramics as early as the seventh century, and it was the Corinthians who founded Syracuse, easily the largest Greek city in Sicily or Italy. In 415 BC, when Sophocles and Euripides were still alive, the Athenians, in a wave of imperialist enthusiasm, and to grab some of the rich mineral wealth of Syracuse, sent an expedition to Sicily, but were defeated by the Syracusans. The rulers of Syracuse, until then despots, granted reforms in their government after this triumph. Their civilization developed in spite of frequent wars, and was to play a considerable role in bringing Hellenic culture to Rome. Of the Greek settlements on the mainland, or Magna Graecia as they were collectively called, the most impressive surviving reminders are the temples at Paestum, to the south of Salerno. Of the three temples at Paestum two are almost intact, and constitute as perfect an example of Doric architecture as anything in Greece itself. The temple traditionally regarded as being dedicated to Neptune has thirty-six massive columns. Dating from the fifth century, they are roughly contemporary with the Parthenon at Athens.

From Sparta and other Greek states other colonies were founded, and just as the colonists came from independent city-states, so they founded independent city-states in Sicily and Italy. What became Magna Graecia was thus not a single state, but a group of independent states, sharing a common language and culture, but no single imperial capital. Sometimes they were allied with each other in war, but sometimes at war with each other. The simple, stark difference between Greek and Roman imperialism was that the former lacked the single power base which the latter was so pre-eminently to possess.

The Greeks of Magna Graecia were an urban people, and

Italy in the classical world

their towns were not only to be models for the Romans, but had already been so for the Etruscans in their first urban centres. The relationship between the Greeks and the Etruscans was basically one of peace, based on trade. There is evidence that the Greeks integrated socially with the indigenous peoples in Southern Italy and in Etruscan towns like Caere (the modern Cerveteri).

There is fairly clear evidence to indicate where the Greeks of Magna Graecia came from. About the Etruscans there has been less agreement, because of the absence of written records. Before the Second World War, historians were inclined to imagine great migrations of people coming to Italy from the Eastern Mediterranean or beyond the Alps, and to assume that Etruscan civilization was the result of such a migration. More recently, mainly owing to research and speculation by archaeologists, it has been assumed that indigenous development in Italy itself played a bigger role. That the Etruscans were influenced by trade, and eventually settlements, in Magna Graecia is undeniable, but that they were themselves the product of some important migration is no longer assumed. In this sense they have as good a claim to being the 'first Italians' as have some of their Latin contemporaries.

Since Etruscan civilization lasted for seven centuries, many of the generalizations made about it may be misleading. Remains which can be defined as Etruscan date back into the Iron Age, to about 800 BC, and are centred in the area between Rome and Florence, the area which the Romans were to call Etruria. The modern name 'Tuscany' – Italian 'Toscana' – comes, of course, from the Latin name 'Etrusci', sometimes shortened to 'Tusci'. Their wealth, and so their civilization, was based on the rich deposits of metals in the area – especially of iron ore, but also of copper, lead and tin. They share with the Greeks the distinction of being the first city-builders in Italy. Their civilization was, like that of the Greeks, based on several cities, rather than one imperial capital. At the peak of Etruscan

Greeks, Etruscans and the arrival of the Romans

civilization there were twelve cities, linked in a Confederation, but with each city retaining autonomy and a cultural identity. Several of these have survived throughout history: Arezzo, Cortona, Chiusi, Perugia, Tarquinia, Cerveteri. Caere (Cerveteri) is thought to have had a population of 25,000. An Etruscan city which was not to survive has been excavated comparatively recently. Even its original name is not known, but it was on the site of a village today called Marzabotto, not far south of Bologna – or, in more contemporary terms, Villanova. The place was evidently abandoned after being sacked by the Gauls about 400 BC. The Etruscans were to found the considerable city of Veii only a few miles north of Rome about 600 BC, and were eventually to establish a king in Rome itself.

No Etruscan literature has survived, either in concrete form or in oral tradition. But if sophistication of art and architecture, and the existence of a literate class, constitute civilization, then the Etruscans were a truly civilized people. Their art indicates that there was a leisured class, who spent much time at banquets, watching the gladiators, and hunting – no doubt for pleasure, rather than for survival. The women wore rich ornaments, with which they were buried in their impressive tombs. Remarkable imagination and a taste for the fantastic are also displayed by the immensely elongated figures from the fourth century found at Perugia and Volterra, diabolical masks found at Orvieto, and the wonderful bronze Chimera from Arezzo. The name of an individual artist, Vulca, who worked at Veii, has been identified. He has left a terracotta Apollo and other figures, and can perhaps claim the distinction of being the most ancient master in the long history of Italian art.

Maybe the highest single achievement of Etruscan art in existence is a two-figure piece of sculpture in terracotta found at Cerveteri, and now in the Villa Giulia in Rome. It was the lid of a sarcophagus, and dates from about 500 BC. It is of a man and woman reclining on a cushion, the man with an elegant

Italy in the classical world



Plate 1. Lid of an Etruscan sarcophagus from Tarquinia

beard and the woman with a neat cap. Both have gentle, wise expressions, the expressions of civilized people. His arm rests on her shoulder in a gesture as strikingly modern as anything in Greek or Roman art.

The architecture which has survived from Etruscan Italy is no less striking than the sculpture and pottery, and rather