

## DIVINING THE ETRUSCAN WORLD

The Etruscan *Brontosopic Calendar* is a rare document of omens foretold by thunder. It long lay hidden, embedded in a Greek translation within a Byzantine treatise from the age of Justinian. The first complete English translation of the *Brontosopic Calendar*, this book provides an understanding of Etruscan Iron Age society as revealed through the ancient text, especially the Etruscans' concerns regarding the environment, food, health, and disease. Jean MacIntosh Turfa also analyzes the ancient Near Eastern sources of the calendar and the subjects of its predictions, thereby creating a picture of the complexity of Etruscan society reaching back to before the advent of writing and the recording of the calendar.

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DIVINING THE ETRUSCAN  
WORLD

*The Brontoscopic Calendar*  
and Religious Practice

**JEAN MACINTOSH TURFA**

The University of Pennsylvania Museum  
of Archaeology and Anthropology



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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In covering the topics of this book, my research paralleled the situation of our knowledge of the Etruscans in general – we do not see them through their own eyes but always through a filter of other cultures’ slanted perception, rather like an archaeological excavation in which we must sift through later layers to reach the Iron Age. Our only *literary* sources for Etruria are the Greek and Latin authors, and an unbiased, annalistic history of the Etruscans was never their intention. For the Greeks, Etruscans were hostile aliens who sought to bar their merchants from profits and their colonists from claiming land – and the Etruscans’ success at both cemented the negative stereotypes. For the Romans, Etruria was even darker – alien yet not utterly, for even in the eighth to seventh centuries BC, plenty of Latin, Faliscan, and other families had Etruscan in-laws, patrons, or allies.

Denigrate them as treacherous and your own betrayals may be justified, encapsulate them as doughty warriors and your victories over them mean more, or relegate them to a position of alleged respect and usefulness – when their official function may be subjugated to the Roman state. The Etruscans became identified as the people with the best religious techniques, who bequeathed to the Romans their rituals for founding cities, communicating with the gods, and expiating sins. Seen through the eyes of Cicero or Seneca, they have fallen to the level of the imaginary Native Americans who were claimed as “spirit guides” for nineteenth-century parlor séances. And the *Brontoscopic Calendar*, by its oracular phrasing and topic of divination, could support this viewpoint on Etruscan religion.

By the last days of Etruscan political autonomy – or their independent cultural identity – that is, the first half of the first century BC, the *Brontoscopic Calendar* was so little known that Publius Nigidius Figulus, a respected friend of Cicero, felt the need to make it accessible to a broader segment of Roman intellectuals by translating it into Latin. He must have known that a number of worthy men of letters would (a) be interested in it and (b) be incapable of reading it in the original Etruscan. The Latin document he created must have

circulated, even after Figulus' untimely death in 45 BC while in exile, after having supported Pompey in the Civil War. It must have been copied, because five centuries later a text of it reached the desk of one of the few Latin secretaries in Justinian's Constantinople, John the Lydian. He translated the Latin document into (Byzantine) Greek, presuming (like Figulus before him) that a wider audience awaited if the language were more accessible. Lydus' treatise, *De ostentis* (*On Portents*), in which the calendar text and other arcane works were embedded, was disseminated and periodically cited by later scholars. In the meantime, pagan apologists were holding up the *etrusca disciplina*, the teachings of Tages, the strange child-prophet of earliest Etruria, as a foil to the Christian scriptures. They were the words of the gods – divinely inspired revelations, brought to men by a supernatural being – and they were scriptures written down at Tages' dictation by a noble scribe, who was also founder of the new city, Tarquinii.

Through the modern period, intellectuals with political goals have often retrieved the Etruscans from perceived oblivion: when fascists held up the prehistoric Terramare culture and the Roman Empire as models of a noble past and justification for modern authoritarian regimes, D. H. Lawrence countered with the color and freedom of the painted Etruscan tombs (of Tarquinia), where smiling couples danced and feasted, in *Etruscan Places*. The alternative of a goose-stepping militaristic state could never compare to that.

Back to antiquity: Figulus, Caecina, Tarquitius Priscus, and other scholars from the first century BC through the second century AD were salvaging and publicizing selected texts or portions of the *etrusca disciplina*, but there were already other texts and systems of divination in circulation. In the affluent and educated circles of the Hellenistic Greek kingdoms, especially the Seleucid and Ptolemaic spheres, and in the Roman Republic and Principate, people were delving into the occult and all sorts of popular divination. The personal horoscope today is probably the best-known legacy of this intellectual world.

But its roots tapped some of the same sources (no doubt via later copies) that the Iron Age Etruscans had experienced in the formulation of the *Brontosopic Calendar*: the venerable and vast divination literature of Mesopotamia. Today, the best exemplars of these Mesopotamian texts are known from the final dynasty of the Assyrian empire, the clay tablet libraries of the Sargonid kings, especially the so-called library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, preserved by the conflagration and collapse of the palace at the end of the seventh century BC. The original cuneiform texts may be traced back through centuries of ongoing editing and augmentation to (at least) the early second millennium BC, and their ideology and topics stem from the third millennium and the foundation of the great Sumerian cities: Uruk, Ur, Sippar, Eridu, Babylon, and others. The first period of intensive codification – crystallization – of these texts was around 1000 BC, and they testify to the development of both scientific astronomy and astrology, of medical diagnosis, and of the systematic study of natural phenomena and wonders.



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Several major works of Mesopotamian divination literature are known to us, and portions of the great texts (some extending over dozens of clay tablets) consulted by Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian scholars can be seen to have surfaced in the Etruscan *Brontoscopic Calendar*: the *Enūma Anu Enlil* on celestial events, the *Šumma ālu* on human activities, the *Šumma izbu* on the omens of deformed births, and the *Iqqur īpuš*, a calendar-based compilation of all the others.

The Etruscan document preserved by Figulus is not a slavish copy or excerpt of the Mesopotamian texts – whoever produced it had thoroughly “digested” the Mesopotamian literature and deleted all the references to phenomena impossible in Italy, such as sesame crops, date palm plantations, scheming crown princes, and war with the Amorites or Elamites. The composer(s) of the Etruscan text grafted on many references to situations and topics that would only have been applicable in Iron Age Etruria at that time, such as the power of the common people or other urban social factions, and the mention of fruits, nuts, pests, and diseases found in Italy rather than the Near East. Other references to “the women and slaves” evoke a society different from those of the Italic peoples or Greeks, but women and slaves certainly do appear in Mesopotamian legal documents. There, however, divination texts do not refer to them with the same tone or situations as found in the Etruscan *Brontoscopic Calendar*.

But the Mesopotamian source texts used by the unknown Etruscan author(s) had already attained, and would continue to enjoy, a life of their own, spawning many divergent successors. Mesopotamian divination literature was still being copied and annotated in the Near East and Levant through the Seleucid period (in cuneiform tablets and Aramaic papyri), and readers of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds delved into those later editions again and again, emerging with the stuff of personal horoscopes, fortune-telling texts, farmers’ almanacs, and also *brontologia* and *seismologia*, the terms by which texts of divination by thunder and earthquake, respectively, were cited in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Sometimes, over the next millennium, the thunder-omens and earthquake lore were attributed to past prophets, from Zoroaster to David and Enoch, and a few works even recalled Tages and scholars with Etruscan names. These brontoscopic documents were also copied during the Byzantine Middle Ages, and a large corpus, showing much cross-fertilization ever since the Seleucid and Ptolemaic period, was compiled over the nineteenth to twentieth centuries and published as the *Catalogus codicum astrologorum graecorum* (CCAG) by Cumont, Boll, and subsequent generations of scholars from 1898 to 1953. Yet another such scripture surfaced when scholars analyzed fragments of papyrus scrolls discovered in the Qumran Caves.

It seems that Seleucid and Ptolemaic Greco-Syrians and Greco-Egyptians, Roman scholars with political ambitions, and Palestinian scholars writing

in Aramaic all accessed the stream of Mesopotamian divination literature and created from it their own, shorter, and usually more narrowly focused, documents. The lore, especially the astrological/astronomical texts, had a significant impact on thought as far away as India and China – just as, in its first heyday, in the second to first millennia BC, the literature had been copied and translated in the kingdoms of the Hittites, Syrians, Urartians, Canaanites, and Persians. The Mesopotamian tradition was like the fountain of Apsu, living water always surging underground beneath the feet, there to be dipped into when the next generation of sages was ready to appreciate it.

I hope I have offered evidence to prompt a(nother) reassessment of the deep Near Eastern roots, not just of this text, but of political, social, and economic developments in Etruria, for which we have long known the tangible symbols – such as scepters, thrones, and parasols, and a wealth of narrative and floral art.

There is a greater issue here too in the epistemology or metaphysics of the study of ancient religion that cannot be resolved in this book. We moderns today do not follow Etruscan or Roman religion as a personal belief system. We may therefore excuse our cynicism on grounds of our greater enlightenment. But there in the ruins of Ashurbanipal's palace, in the clay tablets painstakingly collected and archived, is the proof that a deep-seated religious tenet had been taken over piecemeal by Etruscans from an alien culture – and so how could it be a direct revelation from the gods? Probably no one in Figulus' day was really aware of that deep Mesopotamian heritage or able to judge it: a Ptolemaic scholar might have noticed similarities between horoscope predictions and the *Brontosopic Calendar*, but he or she could have ascribed it to the truth of divine revelations. We might see the adoption and adaptation of Mesopotamian texts as a sort of duplicity at the heart of the religion of the Etruscans, the “most religious of all men” (Livy 5.1.6) – but would they have felt the same way?

But the *etrusca disciplina* was also, especially, the province of the elite, kept, as far as we can tell, by aristocratic priestly families and shared at their discretion. Presumably it was cited as the reason why things in the Etruscan city were done the way they were done. Some of the special features of the calendar furnish evidence for determining that it was created in the eighth to seventh centuries BC, in Etruria, but with input from someone skilled in Mesopotamian divination and in the use of Akkadian tablet texts or perhaps Aramaic or other translated versions of the great works of Assyrian and Babylonian religion. It would have taken only a single family, a single man (or woman) to work with a Near Eastern scholar trained in the divination texts, to produce the original of the text used by Figulus.

By making the Etruscan *Brontosopic Calendar* accessible (in English) to a wider group of readers who are probably not familiar with Byzantine Greek or Golden Age Latin, I acknowledge a responsibility to suggest some sensible modes of interpretation for it.

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Chapter 1 is an introduction to the study of this unusual document, and Chapter 2 provides background on Etruscan religion and its scriptures and their impact on Republican Rome. The reader may then want to refer to Appendix A, which offers excerpts from Classical sources (with English translations) for our knowledge of Etruscan and Roman beliefs and rituals. Chapter 3 covers the environment and climate of Iron Age Italy and ancient perceptions on weather phenomena: a text on divination by thunder(storm) could not have appeared at a more opportune time to exert strong influence on the people of early historic Italy. The Greek text and my English translation follow, the first English version of this rare text (the preliminary version of my translation was presented in 1999 at the Sixth Langford Conference of Florida State University and appeared in the resultant book, *The Religion of the Etruscans*, edited by de Grummond and Simon, 2006). Chapters 4 through 7 analyze the content of the *Brontoscopic Calendar* and discuss the environment of Iron Age and Archaic Etruria as related to the concerns of life on the land and the hopes and fears of the people who used this unique divination tool (especially food, safety, health, and society). Chapter 8 discusses the Near Eastern sources of such divination, and Appendix B furnishes samples of the Akkadian divination texts that were the inspiration for many of the omen predictions found in the Etruscan document. Chapter 9 surveys other brontoscopic treatises, all dated later than that recorded by Figulus, and all demonstrably derived from the Hellenistic and Roman-period literature of pop-culture astrology and personal divination. Appendix C gives examples of their Greek texts with English translations. (There are many points of comparison between the society of Late Republican Rome and our own, including a large literate population with leisure time for studies and the curiosity to clamor for convenient fortune-telling as a substitute for cultic wisdom and communal ritual.)

The Etruscans gave the Western world the tie-beam truss without which the basilica and modern housing could not function, the foresail on merchant clippers that enabled the Romans' bread-and-circuses lifestyle, the "Latin" alphabet and "Roman" numerals, and a wealth of art and technology, much of it indeed derived from other cultures but all funneled to *us* through Etruria. We will never know the full extent of the Etruscan legacy – it probably includes many elements of Western statecraft, the status of women, and popular medicine and beliefs. My study here will point out some of their earlier sources and some of their unique situation and perceptions.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- CAD *The Assyrian Dictionary* of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago
- CCAG Cumont, Boll et al. 1898–1953. *Catalogus codicum astrologorum graecorum*. Brussels. (1889–1911)
- CIE *Corpus Inscriptionum Etruscarum*. Leipzig and Florence. (1893–)
- ES E. Gerhard, *Etruskische Speigel*, vols. 1–4. Berlin. (1843–1867)
- ET H. Rix et al., *Etruskische Texte. Editio minor. I: Einleitung, Konkordanz, Indices; II: Texte*. Tübingen. (1991)
- Provenance: Ad – Adria; Af – Africa; AH – Ager Hortanus; Ar – Arretium; AS – Ager Saenensis; AT – Ager Tarquiniensis; AV – Ager Vulcentanus; Cl – Clusium; CM – Campania; Co – Cortona; Cr – Caere; Cs – Corsica; Cy – Cyprus; Fa – Falerii et Ager Faliscus; Fe – Felsina; Fs – Faesulae; La – Latium; Li – Liguria; LL – *Liber linteus* Zagrabiensis; Na – Gallia Narbonensis; NU – Nummi; OA – Inscriptiones Originis Australis; OB – Inscriptiones Originis Borealis; OI – Inscriptiones Originis Ignotae; Pa – Padana; Pe – Perusia; Po – Populonia; Ru – Rusellae; Sa – Sabina; Si – Sicilia; Sp – Spina; Ta – Tarquinia; TC – Tabula Capuana; Um – Umbria et Ager Gallicus; Vc – Vulci; Ve – Veii; Vn – Vetulonia; Vs – Volsinii; Vt – Volaterrae
- REE *Rivista di Epigrafia Etrusca*, appearing continuously in *Studi Etruschi*