

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF
ITALY'S ANCIENT PEOPLES

The Roman conquest of Italy was necessarily a piecemeal affair, as the peninsula was divided into myriad autonomous groups whose actions and responses to Roman pressure required specifically tailored strategies on the part of the conquerors. Indeed, it is virtually a truism that it was during the conquest of Italy that Rome learned how to handle disparate groups, a necessary skill when tackling the polyglot world of the Hellenistic east. The groups in Italy do not sum up easily. A handful enjoyed a strong and enduring sense of self-identity, a stable territory, distinctive material culture, and external recognition, such as the Etruscans and the Veneti, but many more constituted groupings of a looser character – sometimes civic, sometimes tribal – whose affiliation and territory were contested even in antiquity (Figure 1.1).

All of these groups ultimately fell to the Romans, of course, and the stronger groups were not necessarily better at resisting the Roman takeover than the weaker ones: one only need compare the Etruscan failure to mount a sustained unified resistance with the temporary success of the unification of tribal groups in the Social War. What is significant, however, is that the better-defined groups were recognized by the Romans and lingered on for a time, in various ways, from reification with the establishment of formal administrative units – the Augustan *regiones* – to the maintenance of “dual” identities for centuries after so-called Romanization.¹ Clearly the ability of regional groups to garner

¹ Farney 2007.



1.1. Major population groups of Italy, third century BC (After David 1997: figure 1) (Drawn by R. Biggs)

external recognition had long-term implications. This book proposes a novel explanation for why some regional groups in Italy forged what we can call an ethnic consciousness and others did not. Studies of Italy's regionalism at the time of the Roman conquest have been hampered on the one hand by the biased, limited, and contradictory textual, epigraphic, and archaeological sources and on the other hand by theoretical debates over the labels for these groups. I take a different tack here. Going back to the Recent and Final Bronze Ages, I trace the beginnings of these peoples to regional social networks, an approach that offers new insights into their emergence and subsequent history.

Approaches to Regionalism and Regional Inequality in Early Italy

Who are these population groups, exactly? Bourdin charts two levels of collective identity in early Italy from the textual sources, drawing

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primarily on Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Although these authors use the terms differently, Bourdin has teased out enough similarities in their terminology to parse the group labels as follows. The first level groups are political, structured around urban centers, sometimes operationalized in military units, and designated as *populi* in Latin. The *populi* are nested within larger political or cultural units that the textual sources call variously *gens* or *natio* or *nomen* in Latin, which Bourdin equates with ethnic groups.² This is a simplification of Bourdin's nuanced discussion, but the point to take away here is that the collective names of early Italy can denote political (civic or tribal), cultural, military, or ethnic groupings and it requires extra analysis to determine what type of entity is being discussed.

The term "ethnicity" is particularly loaded for Anglophone scholars, and indeed is rejected outright by some.³ Sociologist Anthony Smith's criteria for an ethnic group are a shared name, history, origin myth, distinctive culture, territory, and solidarity.⁴ Only a few groups in Italy meet those criteria. With the rise in instrumentalist theories of ethnicity in the wake of Frederic Barth's seminal edited volume,⁵ the origin of ethnic groups has lost much favor as a scholarly subject, with the emphasis placed instead on their use-value.⁶ We can see this in the current scholarship on early Italy, in which explanations for the evolution of Italy's regional groups treat ethnicization, if the scholars find it a valid concept at all, as a response to outside pressures of various types, first from Greek colonists beginning in the eighth century BC and then from the Roman conquerors. Important studies of the Umbrians and Samnites have taken this perspective.⁷ It is only with the spread of writing in Italy from the sixth century BC on that we can use linguistic differences and, ideally, self-definition to confirm the existence of self-defining ethnic groups

² Bourdin 2012: 176–81.


³ E.g., Bradley 2000: 19.

⁴ Smith 1986: 22–32.

⁵ Barth 1969.

⁶ Even in the case of the Etruscans, whose origins have been studied more than any of the other ancient peoples of Italy and who offer a rich dataset with which to work, many scholars now frame their work on the emergence of the Etruscans in terms of the rise of social complexity rather than the emergence of cultural distinctiveness. See Vanzetti 2002. Izzet (2007: 114), for example, describes the study of Etruscan origins as "effectively put out to grass some fifty years or so ago."

⁷ Dench 1995; Bradley 2000.

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among those regional groups. Using those criteria, the ethnic groups of pre-Roman Italy emerge at different times in the first millennium BC. Some, such as the Etruscans, are visible as early as the sixth century BC⁸ whereas others, such as the Umbrians, did not appear until the fourth to third centuries BC.⁹ Most of these groups never achieved ethnic status and need to be defined in different ways, either in cultural or political terms.¹⁰

When it comes to the outside influences on these groups, the Greeks – as the spreaders of literacy, high art, complex political systems, new ritual forms, and regional economies – get particular credit for elevating the “cultural quality” and social complexity of Italy and the west.¹¹ The Romans themselves benefited from, and built on, these earlier cultural encounters: their indirect exposure to Greek culture by way of the Etruscans is well attested. However, the rates of change in Italy following colonial contact were so rapid in some areas, and the hybrid cultural forms that emerged were so varied and unexpected, that accounts beginning with the arrival of the Greeks as the catalysts for regionalism are leaving something out. Thirty years ago, de la Genière ascribed these regional variations to the colonists, not the natives, arguing that with the exceptions of the Iapygians of Apulia and the Elymians of northwest Sicily, the local populations were passive and receptive, and it was up to the Greeks to decide in each case to what degree they would integrate the peoples they encountered.¹² Since she wrote this, the postcolonial turn in social theory has placed native agency at center stage in these interactions.¹³ Yet the emphasis on local agency raises new questions. To attribute to the natives themselves the regional variability in colonial experiences, as many now do, begs the question: How did these groups come to be as the Greeks found them? These groups had their own cultural baggage and histories that in large part structured their responses,

⁸ Bradley 2000: 116.

⁹ Bradley 2000: 116.

¹⁰ Herring 2000: 57) suggests the Peucetians and their neighbors in Apulia were tribal groups with cultural identities rather than ethnic groups.

¹¹ E.g., Forsythe 2005: 32.

¹² “Le non-Grec, qu’il soi Cénôtre, Chône ou Sicule, a subi dans la plupart des cas le sort qui lui était réservé; sa perméabilité à la nouvelle culture s’accorde bien avec la nature pacifique et peu dynamique des milieux de l’Age du Fer . . .” (de la Genière 1978: 275).

¹³ E.g., Hodos 2006; Antonaccio 2004.

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based on learned behaviors of interaction. Thus, whether adopting a helenocentric or a postcolonial perspective, scholars beginning the account at the moment of contact must consider the circumstances that led to the native groups responding the way they did.


The impact of Greek colonization is not the only explanation given for the rise of regional groups in Italy. Another line of argument sees regional affiliation as a means of managing resources within a territory. This has been applied to the Etruscans, the idea being that with the expansion of metallurgy in the FBA, the peoples living south of the *Colline Metallifere* – the mineral-rich mountains in northern Tuscany – unified to control the mining industry.¹⁴ Still other approaches frame the emergence of ethnic identities as a by-product of state formation and urbanization over the course of the first millennium BC, a process in which the Greeks played a role but may still be viewed as autochthonous.¹⁵ In all these instrumentalist approaches, ethnicity is understood as a relatively late and imperfectly realized phenomenon, and no group's ethnic status stands up to close inspection. Either the unity of the language is shown to be illusive (Veneti), or the boundaries poorly defined (Picenes), or a collective name is not widespread (Umbrians). Nonetheless, however flawed the label of “ethnic” may be, a condition of regional inequality prevailed. Simply put, the Etruscans and the Peucetii are not equivalent groups, and even if we set aside the term “ethnic,” we need to acknowledge that some groups in early Italy were more successful than others. Not all groups can choose at will to forge a tight bond that supersedes other affiliations and garners external recognition; only some can manage it. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the preconditions for their success.

Identifying and tracing the development of Italy's regional groups is far from straightforward. Recent scholars of ancient Italy have noted the challenge of mapping its regions with clear boundaries, and recognized that the regions themselves are, like Anderson's nations, “imagined communities.”¹⁶ As the opening chapter to one recent volume on Italy's regional groups observes, “[e]ither the phenomena being described reach beyond [the boundaries], or there is such internal diversity that it is

¹⁴ Peroni 1979: 15; Bietti Sestieri 2005: 20.

¹⁵ Herring & Lomas 2000; Cifani 2010.

¹⁶ Isayev 2007: 2.

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difficult to argue for the coherence of the area within.”¹⁷ This fuzziness at the borders is a condition of social groups, particularly in non-state societies,¹⁸ and it would be foolhardy to insist on rigid territorial distinctions in early Italy. Regardless of the porous boundaries, the phenomenon of regional diversity in Italy at the time of the Roman conquest was real and requires explaining. Even on this point there is little scholarly agreement. Earlier scholarship emphasized widespread diffusion and immigration as the answer to the variety of Italy’s ancient ethnic groups whereas the shift in recent decades has been toward accounts of smaller-scale immigration episodes or autochthonous origins. In the case of the former, small groups of settlers from the Danube area, from across the Adriatic, and from the Near East are posited to explain the regional distinctiveness of the Terramare culture in the Po Valley, the Apulian populations, and the Etruscans, respectively.¹⁹ According to this view, so many and varied contacts over a long period of time must have had an impact on regional culture without supplanting the earlier inhabitants outright.²⁰ In contrast, with theories for a homegrown balkanization, it is the varied topography of Italy and its natural internal boundaries and resources that are meant to account for both the tendencies toward regionalism and for the reason some ethnic groups emerged before others.²¹ In these discussions, post-Roman history is erroneously cited as proof of the inherent regionalism of the peninsula. False claims to “continuity” recur perennially in both popular and scholarly literature on Italy. Witness Reich on regionalisms in Italy:

Finally it is important to remember that regional diversity has always been an Italian characteristic, as the most casual visitor to Italy can recognize. Even today, in spite of the Risorgimento, local loyalties are still stronger than national ties and are based upon genuine regional differences of culture, language and attitude. This diversity is certainly no new phenomenon: a Bolognese industrial worker and a Calabrian shepherd of today are probably no more different than were their Early Iron Age counterparts.²²

¹⁷ Isayev 2007: 2.

¹⁸ See examples in de Heusch 2000.

¹⁹ Cardarelli 2009: 36–7; Pallottino 1991: 47; Magness 2001.

²⁰ Pallottino 1991: 30; Guasco 2006: 7.

²¹ E.g., Salmon 1967.

²² Reich 1979: 56.

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But the truth is, Italy's post-Roman regionalism has waxed and waned – or rather, its significance has – enjoying a present-day importance that would be astonishing to nineteenth-century residents of the peninsula.²³ As Lyttelton provocatively put it in an article on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century context, “[t]he real problem posed by Italian regionalism is why there was so little of it.”²⁴ So while environment must certainly play a role in group formation, the danger is in conflating a recurrent tendency toward regionalism with actual continuity.

The Greek Gift of Origins


Italy's regional diversity was evident to Greek colonists in the Archaic period (c. 800–500 BC), who gave many of the peoples of the peninsula names and even histories, as was their wont. As the earliest written accounts of Italy's peoples, the Greek sources are tantalizing. These texts name the peoples and sometimes tell something about the area they occupied, their national character, and origins. But the accounts of the Greek historians are usually no earlier than 500 BC, long after the first period of contact. Works by Antiochus and Philistus of Syracuse and Timaeus of Taormina for example, have not survived, and we only know of them from later references. The most informative Greek sources on the Italian peoples are Herodotus and Thucydides; others have been lost and are only cited by Strabo and Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Despite the absence of firsthand accounts, these textual sources have been so compelling that they remain the fundamental evidence for the cultural history of Archaic and classical Italy. The archaeological evidence has traditionally been fit into this cultural framework. The sources are messy and contradictory, and we are not at all sure whether the Greek and Roman writers are identifying tribal agglomerations, civic identities, or veritable ethnic groups.²⁵ In their descriptions, the Greeks revealed more about their relationships with those groups than about the groups themselves.²⁶

²³ See Levy 1996 for a useful overview of this history.

²⁴ Lyttelton 1996: 33.

²⁵ Bradley 2000: 117.

²⁶ Malkin 1998.

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The ancient sources chart a complex series of population movements into Italy and within it, beginning with the Oenotrians who came from Arcadia long before the Trojan War.²⁷ Subsequent mythological waves of immigration to Italy from the east are situated in the period of the Trojan War, and many of these stories chronicle the homeward voyages (*nostoi*) of heroic combatants, both Trojans such as Aeneas and Antenor, and Greeks such as Odysseus and Diomedes.²⁸ These origin myths, part of a much larger and varied repertoire of myths circulating in colonial territories, sometimes take the form of genealogies, with the Italic peoples made descendants of an eponymous hero. In other cases the myths recount mass migrations. Some of the origin myths are quite fantastical, as is that of the residents of the Aeolian Islands.²⁹ The myths come down to us from Hesiod in the earliest case, but more commonly, from authors of the fifth century BC and later.³⁰ The dating of the myths is contentious. Whereas many of the *nostoi* myths have been judged to postdate the canonical Homeric texts,³¹ Malkin sees them as products of the early colonial encounters of the eighth century BC, suggesting that, in contrast to the *nostoi*, the mass migration myths emerged “not before the sixth century.”³²

The interpretation of these myths is equally contentious. The traditional view has held that these myths contained nuggets of truth, preserved vestiges of actual events that had mutated over time in the retelling.³³ Other scholars reject them out of hand as colonial importations. Bickerman, for example, argued that the origin myths were not vestigial popular memories, but were instead devised by a few elite scholars.³⁴ This influential perspective granted the myths virtually no value at all in the study of the Italic peoples, not even for understanding how people constructed their pasts.³⁵ Still other scholars accord the myths a nuanced value. De la Genière saw these accounts as Greek gifts

²⁷ Pallottino 1991: 41.

²⁸ Pallottino 1991: 43.

²⁹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 5.7.5.

³⁰ Thucydides 5.2.3.

³¹ Bérard 1957: 315, 321.

³² Malkin 1998: 3.

³³ E.g., Pallottino 1991: 40–5.

³⁴ Bickerman 1952.

³⁵ Cornell 1995: 41; Erskine 2005: 128–9.

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of a past to the indigenous groups they encountered, a past fitting of their present status.³⁶ De la Genière's approach fits with Jonathan Hall's take on the value of the myths of genealogy told of the Iron Age groups. Hall critiques the historical positivist approach whereby origin myths are "trace elements" of earlier movements of peoples. He writes, "[t]he extreme historicist approach fails to acknowledge the active and constructive nature of myth; by relegating myth to a position in which it is a debased, hazy, and passive reflection of a genuine history, proponents of this school ignore its relative autonomy and vitality."³⁷ Thus, the rich stories of origins in Italy are better treated in mythopoetic studies as examples of strategies of self-definition than in historical ones. From this perspective, multi-layered and contradictory stories are palimpsests of shifts in those strategies over time.

Anthony Smith has observed that origin myths "emerge into the political daylight at certain junctures; these are usually periods of profound culture clash, and accelerated economic and social change."³⁸ Although they may constitute a defensive mechanism to these outside threats, they may be seen in a more positive light as well: "these myths also reflect the hopes and possibilities of social development . . . and the breakdown of traditional economic isolation and subsistence structures."³⁹ Unlike Hall's Greek myths, there is nothing necessarily vestigial in these Italian myths that would suggest earlier iterations. There is no evidence that the earlier period of cultural contact, with the Mycenaean Greeks in the Recent and Final Bronze Ages, was a similarly transformative time.⁴⁰

Malkin's study of the role of Greek origin myths, in particular the *nostoi*, in mediating encounters between Greeks and Italic peoples (among others) in the Archaic period is relevant here.⁴¹ The Greeks used *nostoi* as accounts of the ethnogenesis of the peoples of Italy, and the stories came to be accepted by some of those groups as true. Like

³⁶ "En plusieurs cas on peut se demander en effet si des centres indigènes n'auraient pas reçu aussi un passé, des origines illustres à la mesure de leur importance ou de leur aspect présents" (de la Genière 1978: 272).

³⁷ Hall 1997: 86.

³⁸ Smith 1999: 83.

³⁹ Smith 1999: 84.

⁴⁰ Blake 2008.

⁴¹ Malkin 1998.



Hall, Malkin sets aside questions of the historicity of the myths and instead emphasizes the ways in which the myths functioned to influence the encounters between Greeks and non-Greeks. There is little of the Italic peoples' perspective in Malkin's study, as to be expected in a book focused primarily on textual evidence. But one may ask if the proliferation of conflicting stories in later periods, rather than the redaction into a single version as one might expect, reflects a thread of native input here. Hall argues as much in his brief study of origin myths in Latium and Apulia, detecting traces of indigenous myths influencing the Greek ones.⁴² Perhaps some of what seem like Greek myths are, in fact, accounts received from the native groups by the Greeks and then transliterated for Greek audiences. For my purposes, however, what is interesting is the acceptance by Malkin, and de la Genière for that matter, that these non-Greek peoples were already fully formed ethnic groups who lacked a compelling enough origin myth and therefore were willing to absorb the ones the Greeks offered. Malkin draws on Smith's work distinguishing between "fuller" and "empty" *ethnie* (ethnic communities) in support of this.⁴³ But Smith later distanced himself from this kind of characterization (and implicit value judgment) of *ethnie*, in favor of a distinction between ethnic categories and ethnic communities.⁴⁴ Malkin also notes that "more often than not . . . group definitions are the result of outsiders' articulations that become internalized and accepted."⁴⁵ But in the Italic case, Malkin accepts the groups' existence, with the origin myth as modification to an already established identity, whereas it seems more likely that the ethnic communities crystallize only following contact with the colonists.

Malkin notes that the Greek myths were not applied to those groups with whom the Greeks were in close contact, such as the Etruscans, because these groups would have been too well known for such artifice to be believable.⁴⁶ Instead, the *nostoi* genealogies belong to peoples that were further away from the Greek settlers and not in frequent contact with them, in what Malkin describes as a process of "peripheral ethnicity." The prime example of this practice is the Greek genealogy for the

⁴² Hall 2005.

⁴³ Malkin 1998: 59, citing Smith 1986.

⁴⁴ Smith 1999: 105.

⁴⁵ Malkin 1998: 55–6.

⁴⁶ Malkin 1998: 178–9.