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An Etruscan empire in the Mediterranean world. Antiquities, cultural models and national identities in 18th-century Italy

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Abstract. The essay revisits the figure of the Scotsman James Byres, son of a Jacobite at the exiled court of the Stuart pretender, who gained renown in Rome as a *cicerone* for English travelers in Italy. In particular, the study sheds new light on the journey undertaken in 1767 with Roger Wilbraham to southern Italy. Rather than being a traditional educational tour, this itinerary sought to substantiate the hypotheses of Tuscan antiquarians, which proposed the existence of an Etruscan empire spanning the entire Mediterranean before its memory was obscured by the ascendancy of Rome. Byres aimed to demonstrate the existence of an Etruscan civilization that served as the foundation of ancient Roman culture. However, the triumph of Winckelmann – who regarded Etruscan studies with disdain – marked the end of this alternative interpretation of antiquity. Consequently, the myth of an Etruscan Italy was subsumed within the nationalist discourse of the early 19th century.

Keywords: Byres James, Wilbraham Roger, Grand Tour, Southern Italy, Etruscan Antiquarianism.

In the mid 18th century, Southern Italy became a favourite destination for European travellers. Their interest stemmed from the idea that it was a magical place, locked in its own past, where one could rediscover a marvellous world that was lost elsewhere. Travellers from all over Europe were still stopping in Florence and Rome, but by now – attracted by the ruins of Pompeii – they were also going beyond Naples to Sicily. The Greco-Roman vestiges were an important attraction, but did not by themselves justify such a demanding journey. The tourist guides of the time suggest that the image of a southern Italy portrayed in dark colours and made fascinating by its social backwardness also played an important role. In this case, anthropology prevailed over antiquity, even if there was almost nothing authentic in this search for a different world, different in large respects from Europe¹. In any case, the journey was an obligatory stage for the elites of Europe: knowledge of the arts, history, geography and antiquity was considered necessary so that, back home, these

¹ See in this specific regard of the Grand Tour, A. De Francesco, *La palla al piede. Una storia del pregiudizio antimeridionale*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2012, esp. pp. 27-34.

men could exercise the political and cultural primacy that their social status assigned them².

One example among many that could be given concerns the brothers George (b. 1741) and Roger (b. 1743) Wilbraham, of an old English noble lineage. Both entered Trinity College, Cambridge, and travelled to Italy – soon after receiving their *bachelor's* degree³. The oldest brother was in Rome at the end of 1764 before travelling to Greece and Asia Minor and then coming back to Italy. The younger too arrived in the Eternal City, around 1766, where – like previously his brother – he was accompanied on a tour of the city by James Byres, a Scottish Jacobite architect and antiquarian enthusiast, who alternated between selling art objects and acting as a cicerone for Britons passing through the city⁴. At any rate, Roger was probably the Wilbraham who accompanied James Byres on a tour through southern Italy and Sicily, which started in mid-March 1766 and ended around July⁵.

As I will try to demonstrate, the journey of the two was, however, very different from all the others Byres' travels⁶. When Roger Wilbraham returned to England,

he opened up for him a wealthy life, one that he was destined to spend in literary idleness, but also to cross paths with politics. Indeed, he came to it reluctantly and late, in 1786, when he was elected MP for the constituency of Helston and then from 1790 for that of Bodmin, both in Cornwall. He remained in parliament until 1796.⁷ In those years – soon dominated by the French Revolution – he was at first a supporter of Fox against Pitt's policy of all-out war on France. For this reason, fearing he would lose his seat, he tried to rejoin the government. In 1794 he attempted to gain the support of the Duke of Portland, but the latter – who had broken with the Whigs and joined Pitt's majority – refused to help him. Subsequently, he ended up losing his seat in 1796.

Thus, the Napoleonic Wars would return him to the mere pleasure of studies: he was a member of numerous academies, including the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries, a linguistics enthusiast and always cultivated a deep interest in Italy. He owned one of the best Italian-language libraries in the United Kingdom, specialising in 16th and 17th century authors⁸. His passion for Italian literature brought him into contact with Ugo Foscolo, who frequented him during his exile in London⁹. In 1817, Wilbraham wrote him these elegant words in Italian:

avete avuto sempre la bontà di sciogliere moltissimi miei dubbi e di correggere parecchi errori particolarmente riguardanti la lingua e la letteratura del vostro bel paese¹⁰.

These words speak of the importance of Roger Wilbraham's youthful journey to Italy and allow us to remember the man who played an important role in his formation. James Byres is not new to scholarly interest¹¹: he was born in 1733 in Aberdeen, the son of a Scottish

² R. Sweet, *Cities and the Grand Tour. The British in Italy, ca. 1680-1820*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, pp. 23-64.

³ See for a brief biography, «Journal of the Architectural, Archaeological and Historic Society for the County, City and Neighbourhood of Chester», For the Members of the Society, Chester, 1864, pp. 61-62.

⁴ See e.g. the account of the artistic purchases made in Italy by Charles Burney: «The first embarkation of books etc. I made, was at Venice under the care of our resident Mr Richie – at Florence my collection grew unwealdy again and I sent off another Chest, by way of Leghorn, addressed to Molini – at Rome and Naples my acquisitions in books, prints & drawings were very great – of these a large chest was made up and consigned to the care of the worthy Mr Byers, one of the best antiquaries and honestest men at Rome...» (Charles Burney to Samuel Crisp, Calais, December 1770, in A. Ribeiro [ed.], *The Letters of Charles Burney, 1751-1784*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1991, p. 1770). See also the notes written by John Moore: «Our mornings are generally spent in visiting the antiquities, and the paintings in the palaces. On those occasions we are accompanied by Mr. Byres» (*A View of Society and Manners in Italy: with Anecdotes Relating to some Eminent Characters*, A. Strahan and T. Cadell, London 1790⁵, vol. I, p. 383).

⁵ There are uncertainties as to which of the two brothers was with Byres in southern Italy. H. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*, Murray, London 1978, p. 178 suggests that it was Roger, while J. Ingamells (ed.), *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy, 1701-1800*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1997, p. 998, believes it was George.

⁶ Indeed, Byres used to act as a guide of wealthy travellers to Naples and Sicily. See in this regard the words of Lord Hamilton, British ambassador to Naples, written in September 1781: «There are two persons, however, that attended Lord Richard several months, & were certainly very necessary to His Lordship, & both of whom I am certain Ld Richard intended to reward most handsomely. The first is Mr. Byres, the Architect, who, after having attended Ld Richard two months at Rome, came here by His Lordship's desire, went the Tour of Sicily with him, having made his journey from Rome & back again at his own expence, Ld Richard having told Mr. Tierney that he meant to satisfy Byres at his return to Rome», in A. Morrison (ed.), *Hamilton and Nelson Papers*,

Printed for private circulation, [London] 1893, vol. I, p. 75.

⁷ R.J. Thorne (ed.), *The History of Parliament. The House of Commons, 1780-1820*, Sicker & Warburg, London 1986, p. 576.

⁸ «The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle», 1829, p. 569.

⁹ See on this topic N. Havely, «*This Infernal Essay*»: *English Contexts for Foscolo's «Essay on the Present Literature of Italy»*, in L.M. Crisafulli (ed.), *Immaginando l'Italia. Itinerari letterari del Romanticismo inglese*, Clueb, Bologna, 2002, pp. 233-250, and L.M. Crisafulli, «*An infernal triangle*»: Foscolo, *Hobhouse, Di Breme and the Italian context of the «Essay on the Present Literature of Italy»*, *ivi*, pp. 251-285.

¹⁰ E.R.P. Vincent, *Ugo Foscolo. An Italian in Regency England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1953, pp. 63-66.

¹¹ See, among the others: B. Ford, *James Byres, principal antiquarian to the English visitors to Rome, «Apollo»*, 8, 1974, pp. 446-461; H.G. Slade, *James Byres of Tonley (1734-1817): the Architecture of a Scottish Cicerone*, «*Architectural Heritage*», 2, 1991, pp. 18-28; P. Coen, *La carriera di mercante d'arte e il profilo culturale di James Byres of Tonley (1737-1824)*, «*Roma moderna e contemporanea*», 10, 2002, pp. 153-178; e D. Ridgway, *James Byres and the Definition of the Etruscans*, in J. Swaddling and P. Perkins (eds.), *Etruscan by definition. Papers in honour of Sybille Haines*, British Museum, London 2009, pp. 2-8.

Catholic aristocrat who, following the defeat of the Stuart pretender at Culloden, had taken him with him to France¹². James had then returned to Scotland to save the family properties that were in danger of being confiscated, but in 1756 (or 1758) had then joined his family who had followed James III Stuart to Rome.

In the Eternal City, the Pretender had established a small exiled court, which enjoyed the financial support of the kings of France and of the Papacy¹³. The defeat at Culloden, however, destroyed any hope that the Stuarts would ever be restored and James III realised that the exile would never come to an end. The Pretender, nevertheless, still managed to maintain a privileged status until his death in early 1766 and the court remained an attraction for the many Britons travelling to Italy¹⁴. Afterwards, it was a disaster: his son Charles, with whom James III had broken off long before, was not recognised by the Pope as the Pretender to the British Crown and the financial support of France and Spain was drastically reduced¹⁵. At the beginning of 1767, Andrew Lumisden wrote repeatedly about the severe difficulties of the Pretender:

Of Her Majesty affairs I can, alas, say nothing agreeable to you. They remain in the same dismal situation. It is indeed reasonable to think that the Court of France, for their own interest, will not abandon a family who has often been and may still be of real advantage to them. However, the many and strong representations made to that Court have hitherto produced no effect. The French ministers are so intimidated with the present power of England that they seem even afraid to hear of any scheme that may tend to their own security. May they soon use their essor [...] may enable him to live with some decency...¹⁶.

However, things could only get worse: without the indispensable financial independence, there could no longer be any question of his Court offering benefits to those who had previously followed the Stuarts into exile. For these courtisana, a new life opened up, and it is no

coincidence that the following years saw Byres' trade as an art dealer rise. In the role of Cicerone, however, he made good money, because his guided tours became enormously fashionable for British people passing through Rome¹⁷. It seems that he charged three times as much as other guides, but he added to his earnings from the sale of art objects to his clients¹⁸.

Opinions about his work – as always – were divided. Some complained of verbosity and pedantry, but others appreciated his competence. Among the latter was, for example, Edward Gibbon, who in his memoirs recalls days spent visiting monuments with James Byres, «a Scotch antiquary of experience and taste» who did not always listen. In fact, «in the daily labour of 18 weeks the powers of attention were sometimes fatigued» and he preferred to continue visiting the city alone¹⁹. But this is Gibbon we are talking about, and so – with all due proportion to all the others, often lacking a specific knowledge of the ancient world – Byres at the time passed for a tutelary deity in the study of antiquity.

He wanted to conquer a space in antiquarianism²⁰ and his attention soon turned to the Etruscan world. The season seemed propitious, because the publication of *De Etruria regali* by the Scotsman Thomas Dempster, published posthumously in Florence in 1723-24, had launched the fortunes of Etruscan scholarship²¹. Above all, the discovery of the tombs of Corneto, today's Tarquinia, had aroused great interest. Anton Francesco Gori published the *Museum Etruscum* in 1737, which was soon harshly criticised by Scipione Maffei's *Della nazione etrusca* (1739), but the violent controversy made the site a place of great attraction²². Winckelmann visited it many years later, in 1758, followed in 1761 by Thomas

¹² *The Byres Family: An Eighteenth Century Portrait Group*, «The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs», 82, 1943, 479, pp. 46-49.

¹³ See E. Corp, *The Stuarts in Italy, 1719-1766. A Royal Court in permanent Exile*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, pp. 345-349.

¹⁴ All this is confirmed by the solemn funeral reserved by the pope for James III. See *Relazione della infermità, morte, solenni esequie e trasporto di Sua Maestà Giacomo III Re della Gran Britannia*, per il Sassi successore del Benacci, in Roma e in Bologna s.a. [1766].

¹⁵ See Lumisden's letter to Mr. Robertson, Jan. 27, 1767: «There is alas no alteration on the disagreeable situation of the king's affairs; he remains here deprived in a manner of all society. Nor have the courts of France or Spain hitherto done the smallest thing for his relief», National Library of Scotland (= NLS), Ms. 14261: *Andrew Lumisden letters*, 1767.

¹⁶ Ivi, letter to captain William Stuart, Jan. 6, 1767.

¹⁷ In 1780 the Welsh painter Thomas Jones wrote that Byres was «the principal antiquarian to the English, or person who attended strangers to show and explain the various buildings both modern and ancient, statues and pictures and other curiosities in this city and its environs»; see *Memoirs of Thomas Jones: Penkerrig Radnorshire 1803*, «The Volume of the Walpole Society», 32, 1946-48, p. 94.

¹⁸ See Ingamells (ed.), *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy*, cit., p. XLV; e Sweet, *Cities and the Grand Tour*, cit., p. 10.

¹⁹ See *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq. with Memoirs of His Life and Writings*, Composed by Himself, Murray, London 1814, vol. I, p. 196. See also J.D. Prown, *A Course of Antiquities at Rome, 1764*, «Eighteenth-Century Studies», 31, 1997, pp. 90-100.

²⁰ P. Davidson, *James Byres of Tonley. Jacobites and Etruscans*, «Recusant History», 30, 2010, pp. 261-274.

²¹ M. Cristofani, *Sugli inizi dell'etruscheria. La pubblicazione del De Etruria regali di Thomas Dempster*, «Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Antiquité», 90, 1978, vol. II, pp. 577-625. See also F. Bregoli, *Mediterranean Enlightenment. Livornese Jews, Tuscan Culture and Eighteenth-Century Reform*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2014, p. 91.

²² On this aspect, M. Cristofani, *La scoperta degli etruschi. Archeologia e antiquaria nel '700*, Consiglio nazionale delle ricerche, Roma 1983. See also G.M. Della Fina, *History of Etruscology*, in A. Naso (ed.), *Etruscology*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2017, vol. I, pp. 57-71.

Jenkins, who launched a successful excavation campaign and gave an account of it in the Roman academies²³. In 1765 Giambattista Piranesi was in Corneto and returned there again the following year: this time he was with James Byres, Wilbraham and the Polish painter Franciszek Smuglewicz, whom Byres had asked to make drawings of the tombs²⁴.

The small expedition probably had different plans. Piranesi was at the time in controversy with the French scholar Mariette, who in 1764 had rejected his thesis about the existence of an indigenous Roman architecture, because the presence of very ancient and impressive structures in Italy did not prove the artistic abilities of the Romans, since they were built by the Etruscans (who, Mariette assumed, were also Greek in origin)²⁵. Instead, Byres and his people were worried by the resourcefulness of Jenkins, a businessman with a passion for antiquarianism, who was suspected of spying for the London government at the court of the Stuart Pretender²⁶. It does not seem that Byres, though a Catholic and Jacobite, cared about Jenkins' political profile. Instead, he was concerned that Jenkins' excellent relations with politics would favour him in writing a history of the Etruscans for English-language readers. A letter from Byres to William Hamilton, British ambassador in Naples, but also a great antiquarian, illuminates his intentions.

In short, Byres wanted to write a *History of the Etruscans and their Antiquities*, because he was sure

that archaeological sites and antiquarian studies would allow the Etruscan problem to be tackled in a new way. According to Timothy Mowl, «in 1767 Byres's Etruscans would have had no competition and would have been hailed as a revelation»²⁷. All this is questionable, but there is no doubt that it was Byres' hope.

In any case, however, the letter to Hamilton is also important from a chronological point of view, as it was written immediately after the conclusion of the journey he made to southern Italy with Wilbraham. The journey was therefore not intended to simply accompany the young aristocrat on his Grand Tour, but was considered by Byres as a decisive step towards writing the history of the Etruscans. In confirmation of this reading of Byres and Wilbraham's journey we have Winckelmann's words. He was at the time superintendent of antiquities in Rome, knew Byres, but had no sympathy for him because he considered him an improvised scholar. In 1767, he drew a harsh portrait of Byres in a letter to the Prussian baron Johann Hermann von Riedesel, who himself had just returned from a trip to southern Italy:

Byres and his companion did not – I am told – encounter the same hospitality [than you], but I understand it. For, such a hypochondriac, fearful and deranged being would certainly not give me the idea of offering him my home and my table; like all Britons, he will retain an aversion to this nation²⁸.

In short, Winckelmann despised the arrogance with which the British arrived in Italy and showed a condescending attitude towards its inhabitants. However, in the case of Byres, his disdain went even further: it was not only the human profile that disturbed him, but also the cultural dilettantism. In an earlier letter, written to his friend Yves Marie Desmarests on 14 July 1766, Winckelmann refers to the journey that Byres and Wilbraham had just made and expresses a condescending judgement towards them.

Un Anglois que vous avez connu ici, nommé Villebrain, a fait le voyage de la Sicile, accompagné d'un habile architecte écossais, M. Byres. Ces deux voyageurs n'ont eu en vue que les antiquités qu'il ont recherchées avec soin à Corneto dans le pays des anciens Tarquiniens: ils ont pénétré dans l'intérieur du pays pour rechercher les vestiges de l'ancienne Enna, mais ils n'ont trouvé qu'une tour carrée bâtie par les Sarrasins²⁹.

²³ On the career of Thomas Jenkins, see S.R. Pierce, *Thomas Jenkins in Rome*, «The Antiquaries Journal», 45, 1965, pp. 200-229; B. Ford, *Thomas Jenkins: banker, dealer and unofficial English agent*, «Apollo», 99, 1974, pp. 416-425; A. Cesareo, *He had for years the guidance of the taste in Rome*, in E. Debenedetti (ed.), *Collezionisti, Disegnatori e Teorici dal Barocco al Neoclassico*, Bonsignori, Roma 2009, pp. 221-250; I. Bignamini and C. Hornsby, *Digging and Dealing in Eighteenth-Century Rome*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2010, vol. I, pp. 209-221.

²⁴ See Piranesi's praise for Byres: «Più d'ogni altro però sono da aversi in pregio le grotte cornetane, grotte cognite oramai da una parte di antiquari e professori delle belle arti e tra questi all'eruditissimo signor Jacopo Byres, architetto e antiquario scozzese, che sta per pubblicarne i disegni in una raccolta in cui mostrerà la sua non volgare perizia nell'uno e nell'altro genere» (G.B. Piranesi, *Diverse maniere d'adornare i cammini ed ogni altra parte degli edifizj desunte dall'architettura egizia, etrusca, e greca con un Ragionamento apologetico in difesa dell'architettura egizia, e toscana*, Salomoni, Roma 1769, p. 22).

²⁵ *Osservazioni di Gio. Batista Piranesi sopra la Lettre de M. Mariette aux auteurs de la Gazette de l'Europe: inserita nel supplemento dell'istessa gazzetta stampata Dimanche 4, Novembre MDCCLIV [i.e. 1764] & Parere su l'architettura, con una prefazione ad un nuovo trattato della introduzione e del progresso delle belle arti in Europa ne' tempi antichi*, Salomoni, Roma 1765.

²⁶ «... in 1760 the Jacobite Andrew Lumisden described him as having "long been known here for his villainies. However, by consummate impudence, joined to the honourable office of a spy, he gets himself commended to many of the English travellers"» (see Ingamells, *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy*, cit., p. 554).

²⁷ T. Mowl, *A Roman Palace for a Welsh Prince, Byres' designs for Sir Watkyn Williams-Wynn*, «Apollo», 120, 1995, pp. 33-41.

²⁸ G.G. Winckelmann, *Opere*, Fratelli Giachetti, Prato 1834, vol. X, p. 322.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 233.

This letter is known and has been quoted by Brinsley Ford, but it does not seem to me that he has read it in the most appropriate way³⁰. In fact, Winckelmann's words not only confirm that the trip to Sicily followed the research conducted in Corneto, but also say that Byres and Wilbraham had gone to the island to find a clear trace of the presence of Etruscan people there.

This is an important point, because it indicates that Byres was embracing the theses on Etruscan antiquity that were widespread at the time. Much has been written on this aspect and it would be useless to dwell on it in detail. Here, it is important to recall that the interest in the Etruscans had begun in the years of Gastone de' Medici and was aimed at exalting the indigenous values of Tuscany. Then, Etruscanism had accompanied the claim of the new Lorraine dynasty to play a prominent role in the whole peninsula³¹. The identity use of the Etruscan past is confirmed by the prelate Mario Guarnacci, who between 1767 and 1772 published a work, with a significant title: *Origini italiane o siano Memorie storico-etrusche sopra l'antichissimo Regno d'Italia, e sopra i di lei primi abitatori nei secoli più remoti*³². The title is revealing of the idea that Tuscany was at the origin of Italy, because it had been inhabited since very its ancient times by a people that had dominated the entire peninsula, had pushed into the Mediterranean and had given civilisation even to Greece itself. The Romans, however, had destroyed it and voluntarily erased its memory because they did not want to recognise that their civilisation was actually Etruscan. Guarnacci's intentions were clear: on the one hand, by insisting on the antiquity of Tuscany, he wanted to reaffirm its cultural primacy in the whole of Italy, but on the other hand, by emphasising the Etruscan origins of civilisation, he distanced himself from Winckelmann's neoclassicism and proposed another way to the genesis of civilisation³³.

Byres was fascinated by Guarnacci's reconstruction, which had long been circulating in the cultural circles of mid-eighteenth-century Rome³⁴. We know that he had commissioned a summary of Guarnacci's work, the title of which is itself revealing: *Reasons and authorities that*

prove that before the Roman Republic, the empire of the Etruscans extended throughout Italy and beyond. He then followed this trail when he began writing his work on the Etruscans: in the few pages that remain Byres says that Africa and Europe were once united, that the Mediterranean had originated from great telluric movements and that the Etruscans had dominated the entire Mediterranean world before the Romans erased them from history³⁵.

These pages, written after the trip to southern Italy in the company of Wilbraham, offer the possibility of reading the notes taken by Byres for the occasion³⁶ in a different way. Brinsley Ford and David Ridgway have already mentioned them³⁷, but I believe a few more considerations can be added. Firstly, let us recall that the voyage went from Rome to Agrigento passing also through Malta and Gozo, but its continuation is not known, because the notebook breaks off on the description of the remains of Agrigento. In any case, the travel notes do not summarise a route in the footsteps of classical antiquity, because after the obligatory stops at Pompeii, after being a precursor of a tour around Paestum, the two visited a number of places that were not part of the Grand Tour route. As the map shows, Byres and Wilbraham were in Sicignano degli Alburni, Polla, Lagonegro, Lauria, Cosenza, Rogliano, Monteleone, Seminara, Mileto and Nicotera. From there they reached the southern Calabria and stayed in Bagnara, Scilla and Reggio. But the journey developed mainly in eastern Sicily: the two visited Scaletta Zanclea, Roccalumera, Savoca, Forza d'Agrò Sant'Alessio Siculo, Taormina, Giardini, Giarre, Mascali, Acireale, Catania, Nicolosi, Lentini, Augusta, Syracuse, Avola, Noto, Pachino to reach Capo Passero, from where they embarked for the island of Malta, then on to Gozo and from there to Agrigento.

In the course of the journey, Byres paid particular attention to volcanic activity: he only admired Stromboli from afar³⁸, but described the eruptive activity of Vesuvius³⁹ and made an excursion to Mount Etna in the after-

³⁰ Ford, *James Byres*, cit., p. 452.

³¹ M. Verga, *Dai Medici ai Lorena. Politica e cultura a Firenze*, in B. Arbei, S. Bruni and M. Iozzo (eds.), *Winckelmann, Firenze e gli Etruschi. Il padre dell'archeologia in Toscana*, ETS, Firenze 2016, pp. 21-35.

³² Venturini, Lucca 1767-1772, 3 voll.

³³ See G. Camporeale, *Mario Guarnacci: etruscologo del Settecento*, e C. Cagianelli, *La polemica Guarnacci-Passeri dopo la pubblicazione delle «Origini Italiane»*, both in «Rassegna volterrana», 79, 2002, pp. 7-37 and 101-114.

³⁴ D. Ridgway, *James Byres and the ancient state of Italy. Unpublished documents in Edinburgh*, in *Atti del secondo congresso internazionale etrusco*, Bretschneider, Roma 1989, pp. 215-216.

³⁵ «We cannot attribute this to their want of records or historians. It is probable that the Romans as they conquered the different states of Italy, especially the Etruscans, destroyed their books and records as they afterwards did those of the Carthaginians. Fearing that posterity should receive any account of their actions other than the one they chose to give themselves or envious of the high antiquity of some of these nations in comparison with their own» (ivi, p. 6).

³⁶ NLS, ms. 10339, [J. Byres], *Journal of my gaunt to Sicily in company with M. Wilbraham*.

³⁷ Ridgway, *James Byres*, cit., p. 221.

³⁸ *Journal of my gaunt*, f. 19.

³⁹ From Naples we part through Portici, Resina to Torre del Greco was Vesuvius smoking throwing gerandolos [...] and the lave running down [...] between the Torre del Greco and the Torre dell'Annunziato stand the remain soft the last great eruption in 1761 caused [by] the lava that

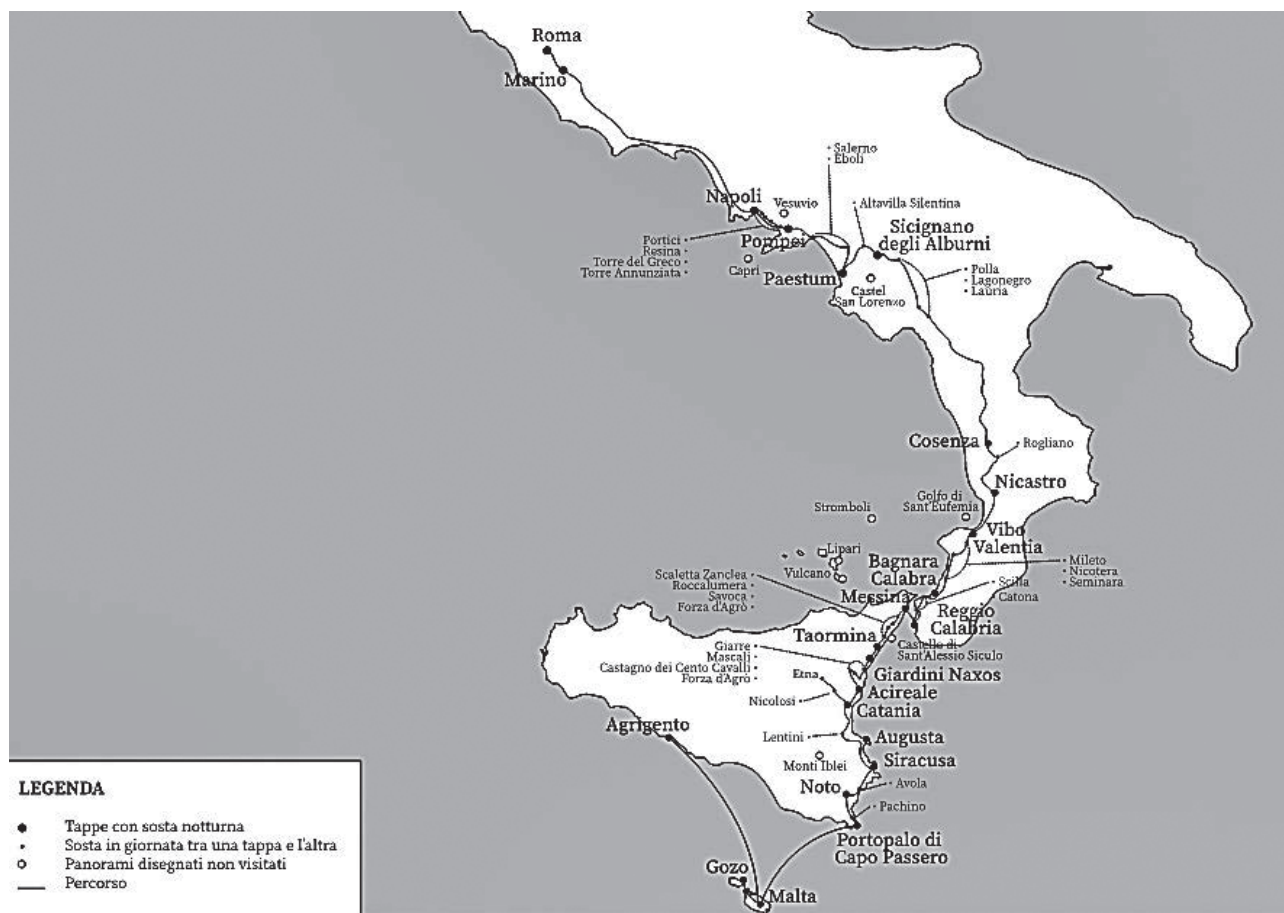


Fig. 1. The path of Byres and Wilbraham in Southern Italy.

math of a minor telluric upheaval, the detailed description of which seems to be the most significant moment of the entire journey⁴⁰.

Alongside this interest, there was no lack of interest in stone types and fossil elements that could date the southern territory, as well as archaeological finds that signalled the presence of different peoples in southern Italy. The first indication comes from a visit to the collection preserved

at the Carthusian monastery of Padula, where Byres notes the presence of Etruscan vases that confirm the Tyrrhenian identity of Campania in ancient times⁴¹. But the most significant notes are those dedicated to the Prince of Biscari's collection in Catania: the presence of Greek, Etruscan and Egyptian artefacts suggests these words to Byres

... we saw the Museum of Prince de' Biscari which is very large and complete in sculpture [...] he has an excellent collection of Etruscan vases some very ancient found at Camarina some with Etruscans, some with Egyptians and some with Greek figures on them and with Greek and Etruscan inscriptions. Which I think shows that these nations had great communications together and borrowed their arts from one another⁴².

burst out at that time from the bottom of the mountain one fourth of a milebroad to run into the sea» (ivi, f. 10).

⁴⁰ See e.g. the attention paid to the lapillus that «changed form in the air, and flattened in falling; every ninth or tenth stroke was greater than the others. I believe they may have risen about 400 feet high, for I observed several of the stones of lava twenty-eight seconds in the air before they began to fall. It was attended with a great noise, like that of a number of iron mills turned by a great cascade of water and now and then a slip below round to the mountain leaked distinct thunder with slight shocks of an earthquake; in the daytime it was a thick black smock and the lava of a slip crimson leaked blood, but in the night time the smock was beautifully illuminated from the crater and the gerandola sleek liquid flames, the gerandolos rose almost perpendicular and falling all round had formed a little hill...» (ivi, ff. 59-60).

⁴¹ «We were most hospitably received at St. Lorenzo by the Carthusian monks [...] Don Mariano Corrado attended us and showed us the convent which is very large and magnificent in the library several Etruscan vases, ancient irons and medals found in digging about the ancient city of ...» (ivi, f. 21r).

⁴² Ivi, f. 54v.

In short, Guarnacci's theses seemed to be confirmed: Sicily had been joined to the peninsula⁴³, had had the same civilisation as southern Italy and had also been inhabited by people of Etruscan origin⁴⁴. Byres' focus on volcanology was explained in the same way: he believed he could prove, on the basis of Pliny's and Strabo's statements, that the Etruscans had first reached the Aeolian Islands and then – following a devastating eruption of Stromboli – had passed with the Siculians to eastern Sicily⁴⁵. Moreover, the passage to Malta was also intended to verify the arguments of Scipione Maffei, who doubted the existence of finds testifying to the presence of Phoenicians on the island⁴⁶. And whose artefacts then, if not the ubiquitous Etruscans?

On the other hand, the same search had animated almost all the stops during the voyage: in Campania Byres and Wilbraham had successfully searched for Etruscans and had continued to do so in Calabria, as far as Reggio – which a local tradition held to be of Tyrrhenian origin, like Messina – to continue the same search in Sicily⁴⁷. Not surprisingly, they had combed the entire area inhabited by the Siculians and then pushed on as far as Agrigento, which at the time was mistakenly considered the place with the greatest number of Etruscan vases found. To all this is added the missing piece mentioned by Winckelmann, i.e. the passage to Enna, the traditional borderland between Sikel and Siculians. In that case, too, Byres and Wilbraham were in search of an Etruscan presence, which was evidently rumoured (and indeed still rumoured today)⁴⁸. Their search, how-

ever, led to nothing, because they only found a tower, which at the time was believed to have been built by the Arabs and instead dated back in the first half of the 20th century to the years of Frederick II of Swabia⁴⁹.

And yet, precisely for these reasons, it is not surprising that Byres prepared a trip to London in search of subscribers to publish his history of the Etruscans. The timing seemed propitious: just in 1766 the French d'Hancarville published a volume of engravings entitled *Collection of Etruscan, Greek, and Roman antiquities from the cabinet of the Hon.ble. William. Hamilton, His Britannick Majesty's envoy extraordinary at the Court of Naples*. The text explaining the engravings was written with contributions by Winckelmann and seemed to inaugurate a season of great international fortunes for Etruscan civilization. Byres' initiative was intended to fit into this climate of interest in the ancient Italic people. Thus Byres suggested that the Etruscans were at the basis of Mediterranean civilisation and that only their defeat before the Romans had erased them from history. These are Byres' words

... the Romans as they conquered the different states of Italy, especially the Etruscans, destroyed their books and records as they afterwards did with those of the Carthaginians. Fearing that posterity should receive any account of their actions other than the one they chose to give themselves, or envious of the high antiquity of some of these nations in comparison with their own...⁵⁰.

Based on these notes, Peter Davidson has suggested how, with an easy analogical play, Byres used the category of anti-Romanism to speak of the sad fate of his Scottish homeland⁵¹. The son of a Jacobite who had been present at Culloden, he would have, in short, proposed the story of the Etruscans as an allegory of the annexation suffered by Scotland by the crown of England. The hypothesis is intriguing, but perhaps too ambitious for a man who always remained closed within the reassuring horizon of erudition. Instead, it seems more likely that Byres resorted to anti-Romanism primarily to substantiate his idea that the Etruscans were the progenitors of classical civilisation.

On the other hand, any possible allusion to Scottish nationalism fell on deaf ears: the work found very few

⁴³ «I think that the old opinion of Italy and Sicily having been moine is very probable but I should imagine that they had been separated at universal deluge» (ivi, f. 39r).

⁴⁴ Regarding this point, which would later find in Mario Guarnacci the most resolute supporter of the Sicel's belonging to the Etruscan world, it is worth remembering that it is recalled by ancient writers, first by Thucydides and then by Dionysius of Halicarnassus. The latter, in order to substantiate the Greek identity of Rome, recalls the expulsion of the Sicel from Umbria as one of the reasons that would later lead to the birth of the Eternal City. Scipione Maffei, against Etruscanism, would have confirmed the origin of the Siculi in the heart of central Italy, ruling out nothing less than that they were a group of Etruscans.

⁴⁵ See on this topic Colonna, *Apollon, les Étrusques et Lipara*, «Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Antiquité», 96, 1994, pp. 557-578.

⁴⁶ «There are some remains of marble columns and ornaments which they say belonged to a theatre. They are roman work, there is sometimes punick medals found here, there is lacquered punick inscriptions. I saw here some sarcophagus [...] of a very singular form exactly that of an Egyptian mummy» (*Journal of mygaunt*, f. 84). Concerning Maffei's assertions, see S. Maffei, *Della nazione etrusca e degl'Itali primitivi*, «Osservazioni letterarie», 4, 1739, pp. 196-197.

⁴⁷ See M. Sclafani, *Salvadore Maria Di Blasi, un'anfora del Museo Martiniano ed il dibattito sui vasi cosiddetti etruschi*, «Quaderni del Museo Salinas», 8, 2002, pp. 55-70, and more in general on the Etruscans in Sicily R.M. Albanese-Procelli, *Gli Etruschi in Sicilia*, in G. Camporeale (ed.), *Gli Etruschi fuori d'Etruria*, Arsenale, Verona 2001, pp. 292-305.

⁴⁸ See e.g. U. Massocco, *Fulgidi segni dell'antica civiltà sicula*, «Giornale

di Sicilia», Palermo, 25 giugno 1958, and more recently Torre ottagonale di Enna, l'antico osservatorio astronomico costruito dai siculi etruschi, «L'Indipendente», 16 giugno 2021.

⁴⁹ P. Vetri, *Monumenti storici esistenti in Castrogiovanni*, Tip. Pagano, Castrogiovanni 1877, and G. Agnello, *L'architettura sveva in Sicilia*, Collezione meridionale editrice, Roma 1935.

⁵⁰ In Ridgway, *James Byres*, p. 6.

⁵¹ Davidson, *James Byres*, pp. 271-272.

subscribers and remained unfinished, although Byres did not resign himself to failure. Even in 1796, when he had already returned to Scotland, the «Gentleman's Magazine» recalled that

at Tough, in Aberdeenshire, resides Mr. Byres who for the last thirty years lived chiefly at Rome where he was well known and deservedly respected for his taste, learning and integrity. He proposed to publish the Etruscan Antiquities of Corneto, the ancient Tarquinium, in subscription, but with what success does not appear⁵².

However, the gentle words did not conceal the failure of the initiative and it is not difficult to ascribe the defeat to the concomitant triumphs of neo-classical taste, which – as is well known – only referred to the Greco-Roman dimension. On the other hand, Winckelmann himself admitted that the Etruscans had controlled the peninsula, but he considered them to be of Greek origin and, above all, he considered them to be entirely indebted to Greek civilisation⁵³. The conclusion is simple: the very fortunes of his work – which, among other things, demonstrated that the Etruscan vases scattered around the peninsula were not such – condemned Etruscan art to a subordinate position. As a result, Etruscan art failed to become popular in the world of the scholars of the 19th century.

The anti-Romanism that accompanied the rediscovery of the Etruscans, however, deserves a different approach. In fact, the theme was present in the European culture of the modern age and this is demonstrated by the fortunes in France of Celticism: the myth of a Gallic liberty destroyed by the Romans had great appeal as a response to the absolutism of Louis XIV and accompanied the will to resistance of the privileged classes towards the centralising monarchy throughout the 18th century⁵⁴. Not only that: in the aftermath of 1789, the fortunes of Celticism made it possible to propose to the Constituent Assembly that France should go back to calling itself Gaul, and the theme maintained visibility throughout the revolutionary years, when it seemed to legitimise the provinces' resistance to revolutionary rule⁵⁵.

It is therefore not surprising that anti-Romanism – and in particular the reference to the Etruscans – per-

sisted also in Italy, which from 1796 experienced the invasion of Bonaparte's French troops⁵⁶. Interest in the Etruscans and their ancient Mediterranean civilisation could in fact appear, from a cultural point of view, as an antidote to the political-administrative intrusiveness of revolutionary France. In the Napoleonic years we thus witness a return of interest in the Etruscans, which, however, developed along very different coordinates: on the one hand, according to a localist reading, the Etruscans became the predecessors of the Tuscans and were evoked to protect the distinctiveness of the region in the aftermath of the annexation, in 1808, to the French Empire. On the other hand, the imperial dimension of the Etruscans is emphasised, again to defend the peninsula from Napoleonic power, but with the intention of accrediting the political existence of an Italian nation. In the first case, the reference figure is Giuseppe Micali, a Leghorn scholar very suspicious of the French revolution, who in 1810 published a book on Italy before Roman rule, which gained much acclaim in 19th century Italy⁵⁷. His thesis was simple: Italy was an anthropologically plural reality, inhabited by peoples who were all very different from each other, but who had in common a cultural model, which could be traced back to that of the Etruscans. In his opinion, the Italic peoples did not include the Celts, a crude and destructive people, nor the peoples of the southern coasts, who had been contaminated by the Greek element. That left the Etruscans, whose civilisation had conquered all the other peoples of the peninsula, including the Romans. Micali, however, was against the latest findings of the Etruscans: in his opinion, Guarnacci was wrong when he wrote that the Etruscans were of Phoenician origin, wrong when he made them colonisers of Greece, and wrong again when he asserted that the Etruscans had transmitted their alphabet to the Greeks⁵⁸.

Quite simply, for Micali, the Etruscans were an indigenous population that had always been settled in

⁵² «The Gentleman's Magazine», 66, 1796, p. 222.

⁵³ G. Camporeale, *Rileggendo il capitolo: l'arte degli etruschi nella Storia dell'arte nell'antichità di Winckelmann*, «Atti e memorie dell'Accademia toscana di scienze lettere La Colombaria», n.s., 67, 2016, pp. 388-400.

⁵⁴ On this point, C. Grell, *L'histoire entre érudition et philosophie: étude sur la connaissance historique à l'âge des Lumières*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1993, pp. 261-274.

⁵⁵ See J.Y. Guiomar, *La Révolution française et les origines celtiques de la France*, «Annales historiques de la Révolution française», 287, 1992, pp. 63-85.

⁵⁶ See F. Mascioli, *Anti-Roman and Pro-Italic Sentiment in Italian Historiography*, «Romanic Review» 33, 1943, pp. 366-384. However, see now namely G. Giarrizzo, *La storiografia della nuova Italia*, vol. I: *Introduzione alla storia della storiografia italiana*, ed. by L. Scalisi, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Roma 2018, pp. 65-85.

⁵⁷ G. Micali, *L'Italia avanti il dominio de' Romani*, Piatti, Firenze 1810. On Micali and his work, see namely P. Treves, *L'idea di Roma e la cultura italiana del secolo XIX*, Ricciardi, Milano-Napoli 1962, pp. 19-35; Id., *Lo studio dell'antichità classica nell'Ottocento*, Ricciardi, Milano-Napoli 1962, pp. 293-311, and P. Desideri, *L'Italia di Giuseppe Micali e la cultura fiorentina del primo Ottocento*, in C. Bianca, G. Capecchi and P. Desideri (eds.), *Studi di antiquaria ed epigrafia per Ada Rita Gunnella*, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Roma 2009, pp. 223-266.

⁵⁸ P. Desideri, *Gli Etruschi di Giuseppe Micali fra antiquaria e ideologia politica*, «Annali della Fondazione per il Museo Claudio Faina», 18, 2011, pp. 7-21.

central Italy and their dominance on the peninsula had only been cultural. Needless to say, Micali's proposal was a localist one: in the face of annexation to France, he claimed the original cultural identity of Tuscany, which had a long-standing primacy on the peninsula. His anti-Romanism was justified in this way: just as the Romans had wiped out the Etruscans, appropriating their culture without admitting predatory action, so the French could do the same to the homeland of the Renaissance and cultural modernity. The Italian discourse was completely absent from Micali's cultural orbit, which nevertheless grasped the problem: the Empire of the French was not just a military and administrative power, but a civilising model, which in turn sought in antiquity the legitimacy for dominance in Europe⁵⁹.

It is no coincidence that at the very moment of the birth of the French Empire in 1804, Napoleon agreed that a number of scholars from different political backgrounds (some had been ardently revolutionary, others had remained legitimists) should found the *Académie celtique*. Its first president, Lenoir, summed up the intentions of the new *société savante* in these words:

The desire to rediscover and reunite the ranks of glory bequeathed to their descendants by the Celts, the Gauls and the Franks, gives birth to the Académie Celtique. A sentiment both noble and natural to manifest in an epoch when France shows herself to be worthy of her ancestors. It is when Napoleon has led them for ten years from victory to victory that they have become more jealous to prove that the love of glory has always formed the main element in their character⁶⁰.

The promoters' intentions were explicit: they wanted to prove, on the basis of 18th-century French antiquarianism, that the Celts were the true founders of civilisation and thus wanted to give cultural legitimacy to Napoleonic France's claim to dominate Europe. These were assumptions which neighbouring Italy – an integral part of that federative system on which Bonaparte based his imperial claim – could hardly regard without a sense of great anxiety. Milan especially, soon capital of an Italian kingdom with Napoleon himself as its sovereign, feared that initiatives of this kind were designed to assert that the states arising out of revolutionary expansionism would have to accept a future of subjugation that was not only political but also cultural.

It is significant that the harshest criticism of this

prospect came from Vincenzo Cuoco, a Neapolitan patriot in Milan, who had published in 1801 an historical essay on the fall of the Neapolitan republic in 1799 and was involved in another, equally ambitious work, a philosophical novel along the lines of Barthélemy's *Anacharsis* entitled *Platone in Italia*, the first two volumes of which came out in 1804. In 1805 he used his pen to challenge the work of the *Académie celtique* and write to its promoters that «there will hardly be a place for your Celts or any other people you like to imagine more ancient than the Etruscans»⁶¹.

Shortly thereafter, namely in 1806, Cuoco published the third and final volume of his *Platone in Italia*, a novel in which he imagined that Plato had travelled the peninsula in search of philosophical wisdom. In this reconstruction, Cuoco punctually quoted and took up Mario Guarnacci's basic thesis: the Etruscans had inhabited the entire peninsula and had scattered throughout the Mediterranean, had given civilisation to the Greeks, so that when the latter had arrived in southern Italy, they had not colonised it, because they had only rejoined their brothers from long ago.

It is important to underline how Cuoco and Micali read Guarnacci's work in opposite terms: Micali condemned its fantasies and considered it completely useless to his localist theses, whereas Cuoco made it his own, because Guarnacci's pages allowed him to imagine an Italian nation that at the time existed only in the minds of a few. In short, Guarnacci's Etruscans allowed Cuoco with a *contrivance* to solve the ethnic problem of the Italians, because he made them a single strain thanks to the (presumed) existence of an ancient Etruscan empire throughout the Mediterranean. Thus, having solved the national dilemma, Cuoco could claim a path of freedom for the peninsula, because Italy's cultural primacy, in antiquity as in modernity, entitled it to aspire to full independence.

Needless to say, Cuoco and Micali were polar opposites: Micali was an 18th-century scholar who sought to preserve Tuscan identity from the encroachments of nationality, whether French or Italian made little difference in this regard; Cuoco was a patriot from southern Italy who, during his years in Milan, had ended his ties with the Neapolitan nation in order to embrace the cause of an Italian state that would unite the entire peninsula through a nationalising project⁶².

These were two different but parallel paths that would accompany the Italian national movement until the creation in 1861 of the unitary state (and beyond). On

⁵⁹ See on this point, A. De Francesco, *The Antiquity of the Italian Nation: the origins of a Political Myth in Modern Italy, 1796-1943*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2013, pp. 53-57.

⁶⁰ See the inaugural speech of Lenoir in *Mémoires de l'Académie Celtique*, (1) 1807, pp. 7-23.

⁶¹ A. Andreoni, *Etruschi, sanniti e storiografia delle origini: carte inedite di Vincenzo Cuoco*, «Annali cuochiani», 1, 2003, p. 15.

⁶² De Francesco, *The Antiquity of the Italian Nation*, pp. 35-41.

the one hand, Micali's work would have given strength to the federalist theses, which insisted on the hypothesis of Italian unity through the free union of a plurality of small homelands; on the other hand, Cuoco's work would have recalled the need for a national state that would put local peculiarities to one side in the name of a modernising project. And needless to say, their reference to the Etruscans, so different and opposed, would be maintained throughout the 19th century⁶³: confirming how the Italian national movement was indebted to the cultural models developed in the 18th century peninsula.

⁶³ See e.g. C. Leoni, *Opere storiche*, Tipografia Minerva, Padova 1844, pp. 3-16.