History

Few countries have been on such a roller-coaster ride as Italy. The Italian peninsula lay at the core of the Roman Empire; one of the world’s great monotheistic religions, Catholicism, has its headquarters in Rome; and it was largely the dynamic city-states of Italy that set the modern era in motion with the Renaissance. But Italy has known chaos and deep suffering, too. The rise of Europe’s nation-states from the 16th century left the divided Italian peninsula behind. Italian unity was won in blood, but many Italians have since lived in abject poverty, sparking great waves of migration. The economic miracle of the 1960s propelled Italy to the top league of wealthy Western countries but, since the mid-1990s, the country has wallowed in a mire of frustration. A sluggish economy (hit hard by the global slump that began in 2008), seemingly ineffective and squabbling government, widespread corruption and the continuing open sore of the Mafia continue to overshadow the country’s otherwise sunny disposition.

THE ETRUSCANS, GREEKS & MYTH

Of the many tribes that emerged from the millennia of the Stone Ages in ancient Italy, the Etruscans dominated the peninsula by the 7th century BC. Etruria was based on city-states mostly concentrated between the Arno and Tiber rivers. Among them were Caere (modern-day Cerveteri), Tarquinii (Tarquinia), Veii (Veio), Perusia (Perugia), Volaterrae (Volterra) and Arretium (Arezzo). The name of their homeland is preserved in the name Tuscany, where the bulk of their settlements were (and still are) located.

Most of what we know of the Etruscan people has been deduced from artefacts and paintings unearthed at their burial sights, especially at Tarquinia, near Rome. Argument persists over whether the Etruscans had migrated from Asia Minor. They spoke a language that today has barely been deciphered. An energetic people, the Etruscans were redoubtable warriors and seamen, but lacked cohesion and discipline.

At home, the Etruscans farmed and mined metals. Their gods were numerous and they were forever trying to second-guess them and predict future events through such rituals as examining the livers of sacrificed animals. They were also quick to learn from others. Much of their artistic tradition (which comes to us in the form of tomb frescoes, statuary and pottery) was influenced by the Greeks.

Indeed, while the Etruscans dominated the centre of the peninsula, Greek traders settled in the south in the 8th century BC, setting up a series of independent city-states along the coast and in Sicily that together were known as Magna Graecia. They flourished until the 3rd century BC and the ruins

Timeline

- c 700,000 BC: Evidence of early Stone Age settlements have been found in various locations around Italy. As long ago as 700,000 BC, primitive tribes lived in caves and hunted elephants, rhinoceros, hippopotamus and other hefty beasts.
- 2000 BC: The Bronze Age reaches Italy. By now, the hunter-gatherers have settled as farmers. The use of copper and bronze to fashion tools and arms marks a leap in sophistication accompanied by more complex social organisation.
- 474 BC: The power of the Etruscans in Italy is eclipsed after Greek forces from Syracuse and Cumae join to crush an invading Etruscan armada off the southern Italian coast in the naval Battle of Cumae.
of magnificent Doric temples in Italy’s south (at Paestum) and on Sicily (at Agrigento, Selinunte and Segesta) stand as testimony to the splendour of Greek civilisation in Italy.

Attempts by the Etruscans to conquer the Greek settlements failed and accelerated their decline. The death knell, however, would come from an unexpected source – the grubby but growing Latin town of Rome.

The origins of the town are shrouded in myth, which says it was founded by Romulus (who descended from Aeneas, a refugee from Troy whose mother was the goddess Venus) on 21 April 753 BC on the site where he and his brother, Remus, had been suckled by a she-wolf as orphan infants. Romulus later killed Remus and the settlement was named Rome after him. At some point, legend merges with history. Seven kings are said to have followed Romulus and at least three were historical Etruscan rulers. In 509 BC, disgruntled Latin nobles turfed the last of the Etruscan kings, Tarquinius Superbus, out of Rome after his predecessor, Servius Tullius, had stacked the Senate with his allies and introduced citizenship reforms that undermined the power of the aristocracy. Sick of monarchy, the nobles set up the republic. Over the following centuries, this piffling Latin town would grow to become Italy’s major power, gradually sweeping aside the Etruscans, whose language and culture had disappeared by the 2nd century AD.

THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

Under the republic, imperium, or regal power, was placed in the hands of two consuls who acted as political and military leaders and were elected for nonrenewable one-year terms by an assembly of the people. The Senate, whose members were appointed for life, advised the consuls.

Although from the beginning monuments were emblazoned with the initials SPQR (Senatus Populusque Romanus, or the Senate and People of Rome), the ‘people’ initially had precious little say in affairs. (The initials are still used and many Romans would argue that little has changed.) Known as plebeians (literally ‘the many’), the disenfranchised majority slowly wrested concessions from the patrician class in the more than two centuries that followed the founding of the republic. Some plebs were even appointed as consuls and indeed by about 280 BC most of the distinctions between patricians and plebeians had disappeared. That said, the apparently democratic system was largely oligarchic, with a fairly narrow political class (whether patrician or plebeian) vying for positions of power in government and the Senate.

The Romans were a rough-and-ready lot. Rome did not bother to mint coins until 269 BC, even though the neighbouring (and later conquered or allied) Etruscans and Greeks had long had their own currencies. The Etruscans and Greeks also brought writing to the attention of Romans, who found it useful for documents and technical affairs but hardly glowed in the

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<th>396 BC</th>
<th>264–241 BC</th>
<th>218–202 BC</th>
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<td>Romans conquer the key Etruscan town of Veio, north of Rome, after an 11-year siege. Celebrations are short-lived, as invading Celtic tribes sweep across Italy and sack Rome in 390 BC.</td>
<td>War breaks out between Rome and the empire of Carthage, which stretches across North Africa and into Spain, Sicily and Sardinia. By war’s end Rome has become the western Mediterranean’s prime naval power.</td>
<td>Carthage sends Hannibal to invade Italy overland from the north in the Second Punic War. He is cut off when Rome invades Spain. Carthage is finally destroyed in a third war in 149–146 BC.</td>
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