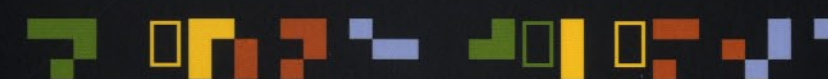




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HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

2010 **SPRING** SUMMER AUTUMN WINTER

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS - COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

ETRUSCO-PHOENICIAN JUG

About half a century ago, at a conference convened to discuss the possible uses of biology in establishing the origins of the Etruscans, the invited Etruscologist, a professor at the University of Florence and one of the most influential scholars in the field at that time, briefly summarized her own opinion. "I don't know", she said, "where the Etruscans came from when they arrived, and if, indeed, they arrived." She asked three questions, and (as a result of the intensive research conducted in the past decades), a fourth problem (almost a synthesis of the professor's triple question, which was itself fully justified by contradictions in the ancient literary sources) has seized limelight — "since when, and on what criteria, can we call the inhabitants of Etruria Etruscans?" Instead of the problem of ethnic origins, which in any case cannot be unambiguously resolved, the focus of research now falls on the development of Etruscan culture (ethnogenesis), especially since finds discovered during the 20th century have made it clear that this culture has an important message for us in the present day.

As is attested at an ever-increasing number of excavated sites, it was in the second third of the 8th century BCE that culture which can be called Etruscan began to acquire representative features that distinguish it from the cultures of the Early Italic Iron Age peoples. The main theatre of early Etruscan culture was the region bordered by the Tiber, and the Arno, with smaller patches in southern Campania, and the Adriatic littoral. Developing organically from earlier cultures in the area, it owes its distinctive features (which ever more clearly differentiated it from neighbouring cultures) not merely to its own internal evolution, but rather to contacts with two Mediterranean cultures of outstanding significance: the Greeks and the Phoenicians. Sailors and merchants from both of these cultures began to trade with the proto-Etruscans, attracted mainly by the rich metal resources of the Etruscan territories. Because the Early Iron Age culture of the indigenous inhabitants seemed strong enough to withstand any attempt to establish permanent settlements and harbours, the main form of contact between them and the newcomers was commerce. This, naturally, was not confined to mere exchanges of goods: writing and a wide variety of craft skills and artistic genres, the adaptation of which by the local people ranged from straightforward imitation to deeper kinds of appropriation and adaptation to the norms and world-view of their own culture.



Besides the archaeology, the ancient literary record too has much to say about the multifarious processes of Greek-Etruscan contact: good and bad, authentic and inauthentic. We know much less about their relations with the Phoenicians: or, more precisely about its earlier forms. It is above all this fact that gives significance to the pottery vase, 27 cm tall, recently acquired by the Collection of Antiquities from a German private collection.

The Phoenicians, as they were are mostly called in Greek sources, inhabited the a territory which largely coincides with that of present-day Lebanon. In the sec-

ond millenium their geographical and economic position meant that they attained an main important role as mediators between two neighbouring empires: Egypt, and Mesopotamia, the latter under changing domination. But the beginning of the first millenium brought significant changes in the history of the Phoenician people, who shared a common culture, but had no common state. The narrow coastal area, which served as their homeland, could not provide enough food for the increasing population, while inner internal and foreign political problems forced the Phoenicians to turn outward and consider maritime commerce, oriented primarily towards the Mediterranean, as a possible main source of subsistence. Their first overseas settlement was established in Cyprus. Phoenician sailors, who had by then acquired centuries of experience in seafaring, then set out westward towards the Strait of Gibraltar, sailing along the coast of the entire Mediterranean, which in the beginning they shared peacefully with the increasingly nautical and mercantile Greeks. At this time, their only permanent settlements were established on Crete and perhaps Rhodes. On the other hand, the greater part of western Sicily, Sardinia, the North African coast, and the Iberian-peninsula gradually came to play host to Phoenician trading settlementss, and from the end of the 9th century, Phoenician colonies as well. In the 10th to the 8th centuries BCE, the Phoenician homeland was dominated by Tyre, then still an island separated from the rest of the country. Carthage, established towards the end of the 8th century, was also a Tyrian colony. Phoenicians mainly transported metal to the great Eastern empires. Different luxury items played a significant role as exchange goods, since Phoenicians had the easiest access to certain necessary raw materials, and were also masters of their manufacture.

Luxury items of Phoenician origin, such as bronze and silver relief bowls, coloured glass objects, tridacna shells, ivory carvings, and rarely, but not least, ostrich eggs were very popular prestige-markers among the landowning elites which emerged in Greece and in the Italian regions mainly inhabited or influenced by Etruscans in the 8th and 7th centuries. Both undecorated examples and pieces bearing painted or engraved decoration were widespread, mainly in central Italy, more precisely in the Etruscan territories. They were fashionable up until the 6th century, arriving perhaps from Carthage, but — considering the early date (Carthage became an independent power only in the middle of the 6th century) — they are more likely to have come to Italy from the Phoenicians' motherland in the Levant, presumably through

Sardinia, which was in close contact with the Etruscans. We may also assume that — as is attested in literature in the case of Greek artists — sometimes it was the makers themselves who settled down and established workshops in Italy.

As in so many other cases, the Etruscans were not only customers, but grateful learners as well. Ostrich eggs themselves could be brought only from Phoenicia, but the decoration shows Etruscan features too almost from the very beginning. The egg shells were mostly used in halves as cups, or (mainly in Carthage) halved as apotropaic Gorgo-masks; and, earlier in the Aegean, as jugs with added parts. Only very few examples of the latter group have so far been recovered in Italy, but an outstanding piece was found in Pitino San Severino at on the Adriatic side of the Alps: an ostrich egg with gilded ivory head, and another fragmentary piece was found in nearby Matelica, with a spout also carved

from ivory, bearing engraved mythological scenes on the body. The imitation in clay of this vase shape, generally made of precious materials seems to have been an invention of Etruscan potters. Few remain of these terracotta examples. The body is usually undecorated, the spout is obviously a motif borrowed from the Near East: the head of a goddess, lifting her hair at the sides with both arms. Several mostly fragmentary examples in the Vatican Museum, which formerly belonged to a private collection in Naples, are of unknown provenance, but another, intact piece found earlier, and a fragmentary example recovered recently, have come to light in Vulci. It must have been one of the workshops in Vulci, eager to receive imported Greek and other pottery and imitate it in its own taste, that created these Phoenicizing vases, the Budapest piece among them. The two Vulci examples and one of the Adriatic pieces were found in documented excavations, where a complete group of finds made it possible to determine that these Phoenicizing Etruscan jugs were probably made in the last quarter of the 7th or the first quarter of the 6th century.

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