

The ‘Etruscan League’ Reconsidered

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The concept of an Etruscan League has always been hotly debated and it is bewildering that the ways in which these important Italian peoples were organized continues to be an enigma. Early scholars based their understanding of this ‘league’ on the descriptions of the ancient authors. In more recent times scholars have been more cautious, narrowing its definition from a political and military organisation to a religious league, that united occasionally for defence purposes. It seems that most modern historians are content to ignore the fact that there is no evidence from the Etruscans themselves that they were organised in such a manner. This discussion of the league will reconsider the evidence pertaining to this age-old debate: modern opinions on the league, and at least some of the epigraphic and archaeological evidence. We will see that much of our knowledge is derived from literature of the first century B.C. (questionable at the best of times), and also from Etruscan inscriptions that mention obscure titles (on whose meanings we can only speculate).

Before we go further, we should note that the word ‘league’ is a term applied by modern scholars – Livy uses the words *concilium* or *foedus*, which, as Luisa Banti pointed out, had a ‘much more transitory meaning’.¹ A collective group of Twelve Peoples (*duodecim populi*) is also commonly referred to in relation to the Etruscan cities.² The numerous modern historians who have investigated the league recognise the ambiguous nature of the evidence. Scullard’s final interpretation, in 1967, is that representatives from the member cities met annually for religious purposes, ‘that they had some feeling of national unity which might occasionally find expression in joint action, but common political action was not frequent enough to turn their meetings into a strong federal league whose obligations could often overrule city interests’.³ Along the same lines, Oakley in 1997 argued that ‘it would be foolish to doubt that such a league existed; but, as both the annalistic record of Roman dealings with Etruria and the Etruscan legend of Mastarna suggest a disunited country, it seems doubtful whether the league had a military (as opposed to religious) function’.⁴

In 1942, the ‘father’ of Etruscology, Massimo Pallottino, wrote that the Etruscan coalition was ‘a league whose basis was predominantly religious, economic, at times even political’.⁵ He also argues that references to the Twelve Peoples meeting at the *Fanum Voltumnae* may represent it as a ‘real and political institution as well as a notional unit’, but that it was likely only in exceptional circumstances that the cities called ‘to meet in consultation at the national shrine and

¹ For examples of Livy’s use of *concilium* and *foedus*, see Livy 2.44.8; 4.23.5; 4.31.6; 4.61.2; 5.5.8; 5.17.7; 10.14.3. Banti, L., *The Etruscan Cities and their Culture* (Berkeley 1973) 207.

² See Livy 1.8.3; 4.23.5; 4.61.2; 5.1.5; 5.33.9-10.

³ Scullard, H. H., *The Etruscan Cities and Rome* (Baltimore 1967) 235-6.

⁴ Oakley, S. P., *A Commentary on Livy: Books VI-X* (Oxford 1997) 403.

⁵ Pallottino, M., *The Etruscans* (Bloomington 1975) 124. (Originally published in Italian in 1942).

go so far as to form a political and military coalition'.⁶ Ogilvie argued in 1965 that 'the league seems to have been originally a religious federation which later came to acquire a political function as a forum where national decisions could be taken'.⁷ In 1971 W.V. Harris denied the tradition, writing that 'meetings of the *concilium* of the Twelve Peoples, for example, were surely products of literary embroidery'.⁸

The opinion of Luisa Banti, author of *The Etruscan Cities and their Culture*, also remains important. Her studies on the different Etruscan cities led her to the opinion that the terms 'Etruria' and 'Etruscans' are 'generic terms and that it would be more exact to refer to the enterprises of a single city or of groups of individuals...Expansion beyond the ancient frontiers was not the result of a collective effort by all the Etruscans...Not only were the cities completely independent but they disagreed to such an extent that they could not even unite against their common enemy, Rome'.⁹ Following Banti, I believe we need to think about the Etruscan cities as separate entities. Ancient authors tend to generalise: the Greeks called them Tyrrhenians (Τυρρηνοί), and the Latins called them Etrusci. At other times they are referred to as a nation or peoples (*gens*), or the Twelve Peoples (*duodecim populi*). It seems that through the external descriptions of ancient historians, those of foreigners, we have come to categorize all of the ancient peoples of Etruria as one generic type, with little allusion to their cultural variations.

Supporting evidence

Our primary source of information on the purported pan-Etruscan organisation is Livy. It is quite clear that throughout his early books, Livy tends to magnify the strength and number of the Etruscan forces, repeatedly claiming that 'all Etruria' rose against Rome. As a few examples, at 2.44.7 Livy states that 'the army then set out for a war with the Veientes, to whose help forces had rallied from every quarter of Etruria...'.¹⁰ At 5.18 he writes that 'the victorious Capenates and Faliscans, having slaughtered the Roman commanders and their army, were close at hand, with all the manhood of Etruria'. And, at 6.3 'wellnigh the whole of Etruria was in arms and was laying siege to Sutrium'. Livy thus exploits Etruscan collectivity for literary purposes and to enhance the impression of Etruscan hostility, Roman trepidation and the idea of the great Etruscan enemy. At 6.2 Livy records that 'merchants brought word from Etruria that the leading men of all her nations had met at the shrine of Voltumna and conspired to make war'. Livy also records that the shrine of Voltumna was where the league met annually to perform games and religious rites, but we should remember that Livy is our only source to use the phrase *ad fanum Voltumnae*. This leaves us in a difficult position: based on Livy's evidence: we cannot entirely rule out the possibility of the existence of a national shrine, but the total absence of any other reference, literary or epigraphic, leaves the issue unresolved.

Over the years, however, several archaeologists have claimed to have located this purported shrine, the most recent claim being based on work done in 2000-2006 under Simonetta Stopponi.

⁶ Ibid, 125. For examples of the *Fanum Voltumnae* references see Livy 4.23.5; 4.25.7; 4.61.2; 5.17.6; 6.2.2-3.

⁷ Ogilvie, R. M., (1965) *A Commentary on Livy Books 1-5* (London 1965) 705.

⁸ Harris, W. V., *Rome in Etruria and Umbria* (Oxford 1971) 13.

⁹ Banti (n.1) 15-16.

¹⁰ All translations within this text have been taken from the Loeb Classical Library, translated by B. O. Foster.

It has been suggested that the Campo della Fiera, an area outside modern Orvieto (possibly ancient Volsinii), was the important shrine of Voltumna and the location of the league's meetings.¹¹ The site was in use from the second half of the sixth century B.C. to the fourteenth century A.D., and the material evidence – votive objects, sepulchral terracottas etc - suggest that it was a strong cult site from Etruscan times into the medieval period. Livy also records that at the meetings of the Etruscan leaders, merchants came to trade goods and games were held. Those who advocate this place as the *Fanum Voltumnae* point to the fact that its vast location would have supported such a national assembly. The sheer size of the site and the clear importance of the temple to the Etruscans, and later peoples, designate it as a significant landmark. I agree that this likely was a point of religious congregation for many peoples, but we do not need automatically to assume the existence of a political council.

To return to the literary evidence: in book 1 of his *Antiquities*, Dionysius of Halicarnassus records his understanding of Etruscan origins, relating that they were united under one king, Mezentius, perhaps an indication that we are dealing with a mythical period. He records also that several times, reinforcements from all the Tyrrhenian cities assembled to fight against Rome. At 3.59.4 he recalls that 'when King Tarquinius led another army against them, they met in a general assembly and voted to treat with him about ending the war...'. Strabo also refers to the twelve cities, but at 5.2.2 seems to present a fair picture of the organisation of the Etruscan peoples: 'now at first the Tyrrheni, since they were subject to the orders of only one ruler, were very strong, but in later times, it is reasonable to suppose, their united government was dissolved, and the Tyrrheni, yielding to the violence of their neighbours, were broken up into separate cities...'. Florus also refers to a somewhat united people: 'Tarquinius...subdued the twelve peoples of Etruria by frequent attacks' (1.1.5). There is also a second mention of the Twelve Cities of Etruria; but Florus was writing during the time of Hadrian. He does not make much mention of specific Etruscan cities, and they are of little consequence, except to show that to him as a later author, the tradition of the Twelve Cities was still alive.

Some scholars have attempted to utilise the titles of Etruscan magistracies to help verify the Etruscan league. Surviving epigraphic evidence attests to different magistracies of the Etruscan peoples. In the past it was commonly accepted that the title *zilath mechl rasnal* translates to 'zilath of the Rasna people'. With this title it has been assumed that *rasnal* corresponds to 'Etruscans', as Dionysius of Halicarnassus recorded that the Etruscans called themselves Rasna.¹² Pallottino debated the translation of this title, suggesting that the translation of *mechl* to

¹¹ Stopponi, S., 'Les fouilles de Campo della Fiera à Orvieto', *Les Dossiers d'archéologie* 322 (2007) 68-73. For more on the site of Campo della Fiera see Stopponi, S., 'Campo dell Fiera di Orvieto: nuove acquisizioni', *Annali della Fondazione per il Museo "Claudio Faina"* 16 (2009) 425-78. Modern Orvieto is usually equated with the ancient city of Volsinii. From the ancient literature we learn that at this powerful Etruscan city there was a shrine to the Etruscan god, Vertumnus, and there is a possibility that the *fanum Voltumnae* is linked to that of Vertumnus. See Prop. 4.2.2-4; Varro, *Ling.* 5.46; Val. Max. 9.1.ext.2 as examples of some references to Volsinii and Vertumnus. I am indebted to one anonymous reviewer of this paper for these references. Another important link between Volsinii and an ancient festival is made in the Hispellum rescript, dating to the first half of the fourth century A.D. (CIL XI.5265). This inscription records the Roman approval to move the ancient festival (previously held alternately at Volsinii and Hispellum) permanently to the sanctuary complex at Hispellum. Cf. Bradley, G., *Ancient Umbria: State, Culture and Identity in Central Italy from the Iron Age to the Augustan Era* (Oxford, 2000) 244-5.

¹² Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.30.3. This is a weak assumption, as it relies too heavily on Dionysius' claim being correct.

people could be exchanged for ‘confederation’ or ‘union’¹³. Heurgon also believed the *zilath mechl rasnal* to be the national head of state – the leader of the Etruscan league¹⁴. Overall, these interpretations uphold the idea of a united people under one leader and one name, a concept which we will see has been strongly debated in more recent times.

It cannot be denied that we do know many titles of Etruscan magistracies. What we are lacking, however, is an understanding of how these magistrates were organised and what roles they played. Several Etruscologists have attempted to reconstruct the Etruscan *cursus honorum*, but since all of the titles remain vague, these reconstructions remain conjecture.¹⁵ Maggiani, reconsidering the evidence in 2000, wrote that ‘most of the records...confirm the remarkable diversity of the organization of the different cities’¹⁶. During the Republican period, each city had its own civic organisation, which leads to confusion and many hypotheses concerning Etruscan magistracies. Maggiani reconstructed a possible *cursus honorum* for Tarquinii, based on the epigraphic evidence. He believes that there were many levels of *zilath* and that those with the title of *zilath mechl rasnal* acted as the principal magistrates over the different Etruscan ‘city-states’, having no role to play in a federal organisation.¹⁷ Most importantly for our purposes, he recognises a supreme *zilath*, *zilch cechaneri*, or possibly ‘zilath for higher things’, a post which could be created at times of alliances with other cities, or at times of ‘micro-confederations’.¹⁸ Hence it is likely that in extreme circumstances, when coalitions with neighbouring cities were formed, a higher office was established, but by no means was this a constant magistracy encompassing every city in Etruria.

It should also be recognised that most of the inscriptions recording these magistracies date to a later period, with the earliest inscription dating to the fourth century B.C.¹⁹ There is thus no evidence for these magistracies prior to the fourth century B.C. Considering that the Etruscans were at their peak around the sixth century, and that most of Livy’s references to the *concilium* date between the sixth and fourth centuries, the fact that there is no evidence for such an organisation at this earlier date is surely pivotal evidence for the lack of such a national league.

Opposing evidence

Fell, writing an Etruscan history in 1924, observed that: ‘we have seen that our records speak of truces being granted by Rome to separate Etruscan cities on their submission, but never of any

¹³ Pallottino, M., ‘Nuovi spunti di ricerca sul tema delle magistrature Etrusche’, *Studi Etruschi* 24 (1955-1956) 69-71.

¹⁴ Heurgon, J., *Daily Life of the Etruscans* (London 1964) 51, (originally published in French, 1961).

¹⁵ For recent work on the titles of Etruscan magistrates, see Maggiani, A., ‘Magistrature cittadine, magistrature federali’, *La lega etrusca dalla dodecapoli ai quindecim populi: atti della giornata di studi, Chiusi, 9 ottobre 1999* (Pisa, 2001) 37-49; Maggiani, A., ‘Appunti sulle magistrature etrusche’, *Studi Etruschi* 62 (1996) 95-137.

¹⁶ Maggiani, A., (2000) ‘Republican Political Forms’ in Torelli, M. (ed.), *The Etruscans* (London 2000) 227-253.

¹⁷ Maggiani (n.15) (1999) 38, 43. This is suggested in light of Rix’s study on the term ‘rasna’, suggesting that it should be understood not as an ethnic term, but as an equivalent to the *populus*. The term *zilath mechl rasnal* would then equate to an institutional title, having no connection with a national organisation. See Rix, H., ‘*Etrusco mechl rasnal* = *lat. Res publica*’, in *Studi di antichità in onore di Guglielmo Maetzke*, 2 (Roma 1984) 455-68. I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for Rix’s reference.

¹⁸ This title, *zilch cechaneri*, is recorded several times in Tarquinia. *Ibid*, 38, 47.

¹⁹ Heurgon (n.14) 50.

dealings with the League as a whole...'.²⁰ Although from a dated work, this is a shrewd observation on Fell's part. One would think that if the league existed, the Etruscans, as one entity, would have dealt with Rome or that Rome might have attempted to create an alliance with this League, rather than with individual cities, but this is not recorded. This seems unusual as Livy does, on occasion, record alliances being made.

There could be, however, a few possible exceptions: at 9.37.12, Livy records that 'from Perugia and Cortona and Arretium, which at that time might be the chief cities of the nations of Etruria, ambassadors came to Rome to sue for peace and an alliance'. Soon after this [9.40.19-20] he claims that: 'having placed a garrison in Perugia and having sent on before him to the senate in Rome the Etruscan deputations which had come to him seeking friendship, the consul was borne in triumph into the City...' It seems unusual that these are the strongest references to Rome's dealings with united Etruscans.

Etruscan disunity

It is undeniable that the Etruscan cities had strong social and religious connections; however, it is also common to talk of the disunity of the cities.²¹ Although these peoples shared a language, religion and supposedly a name, each city had its own art and culture and there was a division between the northern and the southern cities. There is also some important remaining archaeological evidence that reflects great conflict between the cities.

The *Elogia Tarquiniensia*, although dating to the first century A.D., illustrates earlier disunity. The Spurrinas, a noble Etruscan family of Tarquinia, erected statues of some of their fifth and fourth century ancestors. Alongside these were Latin inscriptions recording their careers and honours. Some of the fragments record military expeditions, including evidence for significant conflicts against Caere (not far from Tarquinia) and Arezzo, in far north Etruria. Mario Torelli has, conversely, used the *Elogia Tarquiniensia* to support his thesis about Tarquinia's powerful role in the Etruscan 'league'.²² The inscriptions, in Torelli's opinion, uphold his belief in the existence of a federal Etruscan military, or a league. This theory was questioned soon after by Cornell.²³

Strong evidence also for the lack of cohesion in Etruria is the François tomb at Vulci. This dates to the fourth century B.C., possibly recording an Etruscan interpretation of historical events. The tomb paintings depict a man named Macstrna together with the Vibenna brothers, Aule and Caile, warriors from Vulci, fighting other figures. Some of their opponents are identified by inscriptions providing their names and their cities of origin, including Volsinii, Sovana, Falerii and Rome. There is also ample literary evidence for the rivalries between Caere and other

²⁰ Fell, R. A. L., *Etruria and Rome* (Cambridge 1924) 146.

²¹ It might also be added that Etruscan coins, from the fourth century to the first century B.C., reflect an economically disunited population. For more on the disunity of the coinage systems see Rosati, F. P., 'Gli studi e la problematica attuale sulla monetazione etrusca', *Atti del V convegno del centro internazionale di studi numismatici* (Napoli 1975) 25-49 and Vicari, F., 'Materiali e considerazioni per uno studio organico della monetazione etrusca', *Rivista Italiana di Numismatica e Scienze Affini* 93 (1991) 3-78.

²² Torelli, M., *Elogia Tarquiniensia (Studi e materiali di etruscologia e antichità italiche xv)* (Firenze 1975).

²³ Cornell, T. J., 'Review: Principes of Tarquinia', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 68 (1978) 167-173.

Etruscan cities, particularly Veii and Tarquinia. This conflict is primarily due to Caere's close relations with Rome. According to Torelli, archaeological evidence from the seventh century also supports territorial rivalries between Caere and Tarquinia.²⁴

A Samnite League?

So perhaps we should ask: from where did the concept of an Etruscan league, or *concilium* come? A similar presumption has been made about the social organisation of the Samnite peoples. In his famous work *Samnium and the Samnites* (1967), E.T. Salmon relies on Livy's statement that the tribes of Samnium were united in a league termed *civitas Samnitium*.²⁵ Salmon goes so far as to state that despite Samnite disunity, 'the Samnites were imbued with national consciousness ... when convinced that they were threatened from without or that some enterprise undertaken in common would benefit them all, the Samnites sank their internal differences and presented a united front to the outside world'.²⁶ At this point, Salmon apparently placed too much trust in the ancient literature.

Contrary to Salmon's exposition, Cornell looks beyond the literary evidence; he believes there was no Samnite league, but concedes that there possibly were brief coalitions for defense purposes.

'The most probable - though admittedly conjectural - reconstruction of the Samnites' political organisation is that the various peoples were politically independent but joined together for warlike purposes ... these were temporary coalitions rather than the expressions of a permanent confederacy or league, for which, let us repeat, there is actually no evidence ... Neither evidence nor probability suggests the existence of a more developed and organised federal state...capable of implementing systematic policies either domestically or in foreign relations'.²⁷

From this, it could be surmised that it was the ancient authors that created the fiction of Italian leagues. Most of the historians, especially Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus were writing centuries after the recorded events and it is possible that they used their understanding of the Latin League to create and infer similar leagues for the peoples of Etruria and Samnium.

Southern Alliance

The concept of smaller, less official alliances is a great possibility: particularly, I think, a strong southern alliance of Etruscans and Faliscans. It is also more likely that no archaeological record of these minor coalitions would survive, whereas the fact that there is no definitive material record of a central Etruscan league, works decidedly against the idea. Based on literary descriptions and archaeological evidence, there is a serious possibility that there was an alliance of the south-eastern Etruscan cities in the fifth and fourth centuries, including the communities of Veii, Tarquinia, Sutrium, Nepes, Falerii, Capena and their subsidiary communities. At 5.8.5-7,

²⁴ Torelli, M., 'History: Land and People' in Bonfante, L. (ed.), *Etruscan Life and Afterlife* (Detroit 1986) 54.

²⁵ Livy 8.23.6 and Salmon, E. T., *Samnium and the Samnites* (London 1967) 95.

²⁶ Salmon (n.20) 96.

²⁷ Cornell, T. J., 'Deconstructing the Samnite Wars: an Essay in Historiography' in Jones, H. (ed.), *Samnium: Settlement and Cultural Change* (Providence 2004) 127-8.

Livy writes of the Veientes, ‘whose forces moreover were enlarged by the unexpected accession of the Capenates and the Faliscans. These two Etruscan peoples, being nearest in situation, believed that if the Veientes were conquered it would be their turn next to face a Roman invasion. The Faliscans, besides, had incurred hostility on their own account, because they had been mixed up before in the war with Fidenae. So they exchanged embassies, bound themselves by an oath, and their armies suddenly appeared before Veii’. Not only does such an alliance make geographical sense, records such as this and archaeology enhance its feasibility, attesting to the military unification of the Faliscans and south Etruscans to combat Roman expansion, particularly prior to the fall of Veii.

As Cornell reiterates several times, apart from the literature, written centuries later, there is no evidence for a pan-Etruscan league. Even if we attempt to dig deeper and use inscriptions recording Etruscan magistracies we end up pushing the evidence beyond its limits. The only conclusion that can be attained is that the Etruscan cities shared some religious values and that some Etruscan peoples would at times, possibly on an annual basis, congregate in order to observe their religious dues communally. Some may desire to refer to this as a ‘religious league’, perhaps similar to the religious congregation of the Latin peoples at Mons Albanus. We have little evidence, however, of such a structured union or a formalized agreement. In times of need, the cities could, and probably did, request military aid from one another, but there was probably little obligation to comply with such a request. It would be nice to think that an Etruscan league existed – that the major cities united not only for defence purposes but also to celebrate their shared identity, religion and their common descent myths. I do not believe, however, that this is the case. Certainly, short-lived coalitions would have been formed for defence and commercial purposes, and perhaps some civic leaders met to discuss political and military situations, but an overarching league that united all of the Etruscan peoples for centuries (according to our ancient sources) pushes the extremely limited evidence too far. As always, we are disabled in our understanding of the Etruscan peoples due to our severe lack of evidence.

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