

THE CONSTRUCTION OF ETRUSCAN 'OTHERNESS' IN LATIN LITERATURE*

By MARIA BEATRICE BITTARELLO

This paper deals with issues of ethnic representation; it aims at highlighting how Roman authors tend to portray the Etruscans as 'others', whose cultural models deeply differ from those proposed by Rome. Several studies, conducted from different disciplinary and methodological positions, have highlighted the existence, in the Greek world, of complex representations of 'other peoples', representations that served political, cultural, and economic purposes.¹ Whether the study of alterity is to be set in the context of a Greek response to the Persian wars (as P. Cartledge and others have pointed out, the creation of the barbarian seems to be primarily a Greek ideology opposing the Greeks to all other peoples), or not, it seems clear from scholarly studies that the Romans often drew upon and reworked Greek characterizations, and created specific representations of other peoples. Latin literature, which (as T. N. Habinek has noted), served the interests of Roman power,² abounds with examples of ethnographic and literary descriptions of foreign peoples consciously aimed at defining and marginalizing 'the other' in relation to Roman founding cultural values, and functional to evolving Roman interests. Outstanding examples are Caesar's *Commentarii* and Tacitus' ideological and

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¹ For example, F. Hartog notes that the Greeks define the Scythians primarily by their nomadism (*The Mirror of Herodotus. The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* [Berkeley, CA, 1988]); G. Lloyd, *Polarity and Analogy. Two Types of Argumentation in Early Greek Thought* (Cambridge, 1966), illustrates how polarity and analogy are used in Greek thought; P. Cartledge, *The Greeks. A Portrait of Self and Others* (Oxford, 1993), focusses on Greek self-definition and explores five pairings that in Greek classical thought are constructed as binary oppositions (polarities): Greek–barbarian, men–women, citizen–alien, free–slave, gods–mortals); E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian. Greek Self-definition Through Tragedy* (Oxford, 1989), studied the definition of the 'barbarian' in the Athenian tragedians. On issues of Etruscan identity and self-definition in a wider Mediterranean context, see V. Izzet, *The Archaeology of Etruscan Society* (Cambridge, 2007), especially chapters 1 and 6.

² T. N. Habinek, *The Politics of Latin Literature. Writing, Identity, and Empire in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, NJ, 1998).

idealized representation of the Germans as an uncorrupted, warlike people in the *Germania*. In several cases there is evidence of layering in the representation of foreign peoples, since Roman authors often re-craft Greek representations: thus, the biased Roman portrayal of the Near East³ or of the Sardinians largely draws on Greek representations;⁴ in portraying the Samnites, Latin authors reshaped elements already elaborated by the Tarentines.⁵ Roman representations of foreign peoples often reveal the pressing need to justify attacks against them, and constantly present Rome as possessing the 'correct' cultural and religious values: thus, the Marsi and Hirpi become exemplar of dangerous religious practices;⁶ the Ligures are labelled as liars,⁷ and the Carthaginians are untrustworthy.⁸ At times, Roman texts offer conflicting images in the characterization of other peoples: for example, Emma Dench has shown how the peoples of the central Apennines, such as the Sabini and Samnites, can be presented in some texts as wealthy and brought to luxury, later as embodying warrior virtues, and finally as the incarnation of positive Italic austerity.⁹ In this case, varying cultural needs produce diverging representations.

The study of the complex and often ambiguous Roman representation of Etruria involves considering that several motifs of this purposeful representation, such as the Etruscans' love for luxury and decadent 'softness' (*tryphê*), their oriental origin, their excessive wealth, and their cowardice derive from previous Greek characterizations of the Etruscans,¹⁰ and that Latin writers tend to give a biased

³ G. Piccaluga, 'La mitizzazione del Vicino Oriente nelle religioni del mondo classico', in H. J. Nissen and H. Renger (eds.), *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn*, XXV RAI, Berlin, 1978 (Berlin, 1982), 573–612.

⁴ A. Brelich, 'Sardegna mitica', in *Atti del Convegno di Studi Religiosi Sardi, Cagliari 24–26 maggio 1962* (Padua, 1963), 23–33.

⁵ E. Dench, 'Images of Italian Austerity from Cato to Tacitus', in M. Cèbeillac-Gervasoni (ed.), *Les Elites municipales de l'Italie péninsulaire des Gracques à Neron* (Naples and Rome, 1996), 247–54.

⁶ G. Piccaluga, 'I Marsi e gli Hirpi. Due diversi modi di sistemare le minoranze etniche', in P. Xella (ed.), *Magia. Studi di storia delle religioni in memoria di Raffaella Garosi* (Rome, 1976), 207–31.

⁷ C. Santini, 'Etnici e filologia', *GIF* 50 (1998), 3–22.

⁸ G. H. Waldherr, "'Punica fides". Das Bild der Karthager in Rom', *Gymnasium: Zeitschrift für Kultur der Antike und Bildung* 107 (2000), 193–222.

⁹ Dench (n. 5), 247–54; E. Dench, 'Sacred Springs to the Social War: Myths of Origins and Questions of Identity in the Central Apennines', in T. J. Cornell and K. Lomas (eds.), *Gender and Ethnicity in Ancient Italy* (London, 1997), 43–51.

¹⁰ A survey of the representation of the Etruscans in Greek sources can be found in G. Firpo, 'Posidonio, Diodoro e gli Etruschi', *Aevum* 71 (1997), 103–11, particularly 105, n. 10. R. T. Macfarlane, 'Etruscan Literary Figures from Horace to Ovid', in J. F. Hall (ed.), *Etruscan Italy* (Provo, UT, 1996), 261, n. 60, defines as 'topical' the theme of Etruscan decadence and

interpretation to historical facts. There are already studies that illustrate the existence of a well-developed typecast characterization of the Etruscan kings of Rome, whose flaws and vices (according to Latin writers) included pride, *luxuria*, laxity, lack of scruples, and unrestrained passions.¹¹ In any case, the stereotypical descriptions of the ancient Etruscans in the works of Roman historians originate in a carefully calculated and consciously realized attempt to marginalize a prestigious civilization, whether Rome had an Etruscan past (or a cultural debt towards Etruria) or not.¹²

This paper highlights how the relationship that Rome had with Etruria and its culture was ambivalent – oscillating between feelings of fear and admiration – by analysing literary works and historical narratives by certain key authors who lived in the early imperial age. The first part of the paper focusses on how Virgil portrays mythical Etruscans at war, which the poet subtly opposes to Roman culture; his portrayal of the Etruscans living in a time preceding the foundation of Rome coincides with Roman historians' (especially with Livy's) representations of the Etruscans of the monarchic and early Republican period of the history of Rome. In other words, the key motifs in the representation of Etruria in Roman literary works and in historical works substantially coincide; even if poets and historians use different representational strategies, both draw on the same *topoi*: the technical means of representation may vary, but the purpose and results are consistent. The second part of the paper shows that the literary portrayals (written in the early imperial age) of Roman politicians of Etruscan descent, such as Maecenas, Sejanus, and Otho, draw on the

excess in the classical world. Dench (n. 5), 249, remarks: 'The Etruscans...are a by-word for luxury and decadence'. The most famous description of the Etruscan *tryphè* ('love for luxury') is in Diodorus Siculus (who lived in the Augustan age), who says that the Etruscans are *anandrois* ('not men') because of their love for luxury and drinking (Diod. Sic. 5.40.4). Strong remarks on the Etruscan cowardice can be found in Dion. Hal. *exc. Ambr.* 13.11.2 (the Tyrrhenian warriors are said to be less brave than women).

¹¹ G. Piccaluga, *Terminus. I segni di confine nella religione romana* (Rome, 1974), 190. See also G. Piccaluga, 'Attus Navius', *SMSR* 40 (1969), 151–208.

¹² According to some historians, Rome was originally an Etruscan city (e.g. M. Cristofani (ed.), *La grande Roma dei Tarquini. Roma, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 12 giugno–30 settembre 1990* [Roma, 1990]). C. Smith, *Early Rome and Latium. Economy and Society c 1000–500 BC* (Oxford, 1996), re-examines the archaeological evidence of Etruscan presence in Rome and Latium. T. J. Cornell has denied that 'Etruria' ever ruled over Rome, and has argued for a more nuanced model of reciprocal influences between various centres of central western Italy (*The Beginnings of Rome. Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars (c. 1000–264 BC)* [London and New York, 1995], 151–72). The historian of religion G. Piccaluga adopts a different perspective, noting that the Roman tradition presents the Roman monarchic period as a mythical phase, rather than in the 'objective' way that a modern historian might desire (*Terminus* [n. 11], 190). On the importance of Etruscan families in Rome from the early Republic to Caesar, see J. F. Hall, 'From Tarquins to Caesars: Etruscan Governance at Rome', in Hall (n. 10), 149–89.

same traditional motifs found in Virgil's and Livy's representations of ancient Etruscans.

Mythical Etruria at war in the *Aeneid*, Livy, and the *Punica*

Weapons, hunting, and cavalry

In the catalogue of Aeneas' Italic allies, Virgil describes the peculiar weapons and way of fighting of the Etruscans. They use bow and arrows,¹³ along with spears (*hastae*),¹⁴ and javelins such as the *iaculum* and the *sparus*,¹⁵ and other generic throwing weapons such as *tela* and *missiles*.¹⁶ Such weapons were used in long-distance fights, a point that Virgil underlines by using adverbs such as *eminus* (10.801) and *longe* (10.716), which both mean 'from afar'. Virgil seems to suggest that the Etruscans do not use the swords they have:¹⁷ the leader of the Etruscan army, Tarchon, is shown breaking the edge of his spear and using it as a dagger,¹⁸ as if he had no sword; the Etruscan king Mezentius has a sword (*ensis*),¹⁹ but he never uses it in the poem. Rather Mezentius uses a sling (9.586), a big rock (*saxum*),²⁰ or even an 'Etruscan torch'.²¹

The use of the bow in war, generally ascribed by the ancient Greeks to eastern peoples (including the Trojans),²² was considered inappropriate, because the bow was a weapon used by hunters.²³ In the *Aeneid*, the bow is used by the huntress Camilla,²⁴ and by Aeneas' son Ascanius as a hunting weapon (7.497 ff.) and in battle (9.590–1). The bow seems to be, therefore, the favourite weapon of hunters and

¹³ Virg. *Aen.* 10.168.

¹⁴ Ibid. 10.178. Mezentius also uses *hastae* (9.586).

¹⁵ Ibid. 9.572, 11.760 (*iaculum*); 11.682 (*sparus*).

¹⁶ Ibid. 10.801 (*tela*); 10.716 (*missiles*).

¹⁷ Ibid. 10.751; 11.734–5.

¹⁸ Ibid. 11.747 f.: *a summa...ab hasta / defringit ferrum* ([Tarchon] breaks off the iron top of his spear).

¹⁹ Ibid. 11.11.

²⁰ Ibid. 10.698.

²¹ Ibid. 9.521–2: *etruscam / pinum*.

²² E. Borgna, *L'arco e le frecce nel mondo miceneo* (Rome, 1992), 85–7; A. C. Cassio, 'Giavellotti contro frecce', *Rivista di Filologia e di Istruzione Classica* 122 (1994), 18–19; C. Sutherland, 'Archery in the Homeric Epics', *Classics Ireland* 8 (2001), <<http://www.ucd.ie/cai/classics-ireland/2001/sutherland.html>>, accessed 5 May 2009.

²³ See K. Crissy, 'Herakles, Odysseus, and the Bow: *Odyssey* 21.11–41', *CJ* 93 (1997), 41–53.

²⁴ The nymph Opis, a companion of the goddess Diana, calls the arrows *nostrae* ('ours') (Virg. *Aen.* 11.843–4).

young men; what is more, Aeneas, the Trojan ancestor of the Romans, is never presented as a bowman.

Ascribing the use of the bow to the Etruscans, could have a double purpose, since it could be a reference to their supposed Lydian origin²⁵ – a tradition that Virgil (7.479–80) recalls, by saying that the Lydians had once settled at Agylla, Mezentius' home town – and it could also aim at portraying the Etruscan contemporaries of Aeneas as hunters. In the poem, the *iaculum* is also related to hunting: the Trojan Nisus goes hunting with bow, arrows, and *iaculum* (*Aen.* 9.176 ff.). Further, the poet defines the Etruscan Ornytus, who wears a bull's skin, and a wolf's head as helmet,²⁶ as *venator* ('hunter'; 11.678) and Lausus, Mezentius' son, as *debellator ferarum* ('destroyer of wild beasts'; 7.651), while Mezentius is compared to the mythical hunter Orion (10.763). In addition, the Etruscans (whose camp is located near a wood sacred to the 'forest' god Silvanus)²⁷ are referred to as *agrestis*,²⁸ a term indicating that which is opposed to the civilized, urban citizen.²⁹ Even more explicit are the mocking words that Camilla addresses to Ornythus, by asking him if he thought he was hunting wild animals in the woods: *silvis te, tyrrhene, feras agitare putasti?* (11.686). In other words, Camilla declares that the Etruscans fight like hunters. By consistently linking the Etruscans to hunting, Virgil presents them as predators, who fought as hunters by using the bow and other hunting weapons, rather than as warriors. As such, in the *Aeneid*, the mythical Etruscans are consistently linked to wild animals, wild spaces, and the non-urban world inhabited by the hunter.³⁰ Since, in ancient Rome, the dichotomy nature/culture seems to have been organized around three main oppositions: between town

²⁵ The Etruscans had sailed to Italy from Lydia summoned by an oracle (Herod. 1.94; Dion. Hal. 1.27.1). A critical take on this tradition is given in D. Briquel, *L'Origine lydienne des Etrusques. Histoire de la doctrine dans l'Antiquité* (Rome, 1991).

²⁶ Virg. *Aen.* 11.677–82. This epithet is also used of another Etruscan, Herminius, who does not wear any armour (11.642 ff.).

²⁷ Ibid. 600–5. On Silvanus, see Robert Schilling, 'Silvano', in Yves Bonnefoy (ed.), *Dizionario delle mitologie e delle religioni* (Milan, 1989), 1653–4.

²⁸ Virg. *Aen.* 9.11: *collectos armat agrestis*. Ornytus has an *agrestis...sparus* ('rustic spear'; 11.682).

²⁹ A. Brelich, *Tre variazioni romane sul tema delle origini* (Rome, 1976), 74–5, notes that the term *agrestis* could simply mean "selvaggio", "rustico", in opposizione a "civile", "cittadino" ('wild, rustic, as opposed to civilized, urban').

³⁰ Virgil compares Tarchon to an eagle (11.750–6), Mezentius to a wild boar (10.707–13) and a lion (10.723–68), and Arruns to a wolf (11.809–13). Moreover, Asilas understands the languages of birds (10.176–7), and Cynus, Cynira's father, had been changed into a swan (10.189–90). Virgil also connects the Etruscans to wilderness: they celebrate a sacred banquet in the woods (11.740); Thrasymenus gives his name to a lake, his father Tyrrhenus to the Tyrrhenian sea, and Ocnus is the son of the river Tiber (10.199–200).

and countryside,³¹ between *urbanitas* and *rusticitas* and the values they mobilize (elegance versus rudeness, culture versus ignorance),³² and between the Roman space and certain foreign spaces that cannot (normally) be inhabited, such as 'mining'³³ and 'desert' spaces,³⁴ Virgil could be suggesting that these mythical Etruscan 'hunters' are inseparable from the wilderness.

The historian Livy does not mention the Etruscan use of the bow in war; nonetheless, his representation of the Etruscans coincides with Virgil's portrayal in a number of aspects: for example, in Livy they fight against the Romans by using torches as weapons.³⁵ Livy also characterizes the Etruscans as 'hunters/predators' by writing that the Veientes raided the Roman territory, 'plundering rather than following the appropriate rules of war' (*populandi magis quam iusti more belli*, 1.15.1); in another passage, he remarks how inappropriate the situation was by saying that between Rome and Etruria there was 'neither peace nor war' (*neque pax neque bellum*, 2.48.5). A later writer, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, uses the term ἀρπαγή ('looting') in relation to ancient Etruscan warriors (*Ant. Rom.* 3.41.1); he also describes the Etruscans fighting against the Roman clan of the Fabi 'as if these were wild animals' (ὥσπερ θηρία, *Ant. Rom.* 9.21.4).

Throughout Vergil's poem, the Etruscans usually fight as horsemen,³⁶ just like the huntress Camilla, who is the leader (*dux*) of the Latin cavalry (*Virg. Aen.* 7.508–21). Livy also characterizes the Etruscans who lived at the time of the Roman kings as horsemen. Tarquinius Priscus (who came from Etruria), considering that the Roman army's weak point was the cavalry, tried to add several new centuries to those established by Romulus. However, Tarquinius was only allowed to double the number of Roman horsemen.³⁷ When

³¹ N. Purcell, 'Tomb and Suburb', in H. Von Hesberg and P. Zauker (eds.), *Römische Gräberstrassen. Selbstdarstellung, Status, Standard. Kolloquium in München von 28. bis 30. Oktober 1985* (Munich, 1987).

³² See C. P. Craig, 'Representations: Images of the World in Ciceronian Oratory', *Rhetorica* 12 (1994), 455–6.

³³ C. Domergue, 'La Notion d'espace minier dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine', *Pallas* 28 (1981), 89–99.

³⁴ J. Kolendo, 'Les "Déserts" dans les pays barbares: représentation et réalités', *DHA* 17 (1991), 35–60.

³⁵ The Veientes (*Liv.* 5.7.2) and the Fidenates attack the Roman soldiers 'armed with fire-brands, and...burning torches' (*Liv.* 4.33.2: *ignibus armata...facibusque ardentibus*).

³⁶ Tarchon leads Aeneas' horsemen (*Virg. Aen.* 11.758), and fights on horseback (11.740 ff.); Astur is 'confident in his horse' (*equo fidens*, 10.181); Tyrrhenus (11.614), and Ornytus (11.678) are also horsemen. When Aeneas fights with Mezentius, the Etruscan is on horseback (10.885). Lausus is called *ecum domitor* ('horse-breaker', 7.651). Other references to Etruscan horsemen also occur in 11.517 and 11.620.

³⁷ *Liv.* 1.36.2, 7. Tarquin's horsemen had defeated the Etruscans (*Dion. Hal. Ant. Rom.* 3.53.1–5).

describing the early Republican period wars against Etruria, Livy contrasts the Romans (presented as foot soldiers) and the Etruscans (portrayed as horsemen). The Etruscan cavalry shows some bravery in the wars against Rome;³⁸ Roman horsemen, on the contrary, must fight as 'foot soldiers' (*omissis equis*) to overcome the Etruscans (Liv. 9.39.8). Once the Etruscans serve in the Roman army as auxiliary horsemen, however, they risk, on certain occasions, causing the defeat of the Romans.³⁹

Moral flaws

Cowardice is one of a long list of moral flaws ascribed to the Etruscans in the *Aeneid*. Virgil suggests that the Etruscans refrain from fighting face to face;⁴⁰ and the Etruscan leader, Tarchon, harshly reproaches his soldiers because Camilla has defeated them: *femina palantis agit atque haec agmina verti! / quo ferrum quidve haec gerimus tela inrita dextris?* ('a woman chases these scattered ranks! To what purpose [this] iron and why do we hold useless weapons in [our] hands?').⁴¹ This Virgilian episode is remarkable because it shows that a woman can easily defy the Etruscans and that the latter are ready to acknowledge their cowardice – a pattern also found in the Roman tradition on Cloelia, whose courageous evasion from the Etruscan camp convinced Porsenna to abandon the siege of Rome.⁴² Livy is keen to remark that *timor* ('fear') induces the Etruscans to take refuge in their well-defended towns, to avoid fighting the Romans,⁴³ and that the Etruscans tried to hire the Galli as mercenaries against Rome.⁴⁴ His Furius Camillus tells the Romans that their military 'ability is superior to that of Etruria': *non universa Etruria bello vobis par est* (Liv. 5.54.5).

In the *Aeneid*, the Etruscan cowardice is coupled with effeminacy and love of luxury. Virgil, in a powerful exemplification of the *tryphè*,

³⁸ Liv. 4.18.8; 4.19.5–6.

³⁹ During the second Punic war, Marcellus led a group of horsemen from Fregellae (a Roman colony in Latium) and Etruria against the Carthaginians, but the Etruscans abandon the fight (Liv. 27.27.5). As Livy remarks (27.26.11), if the Etruscans had not 'discouraged the others' (*pavorem ceteris iniecisset*), Marcellus would have won.

⁴⁰ Virg. *Aen.* 10.715: *stricto concurrere ferrum* ('attack with a sword').

⁴¹ Ibid. 11.734 f. Further, Camilla tells Ornytus that 'a woman in arms exposes your boasts' (*vestra... muliebribus armis / verba redargueret*, 11.687 f.).

⁴² Virg. *Aen.* 8.651; Liv. 2.13; Val Max. 3.3.2.2; Plin. *NH* 34.28; Sen. *Cons. ad Marciam* XVI.1–2.

⁴³ Liv. 10.2.3; 10.11.5.

⁴⁴ Liv. 5.33; 10.10.

presents the Etruscans as 'enthusiasts and only interested in' (*hic amor hoc studium*) serving Venus and Bacchus, in sacred banquets where they drink, eat, make love, and dance.⁴⁵

Virgil also criticizes the Etruscans for their pride and cruelty: Mezentius is guilty of tyrannical government,⁴⁶ and unheard-of cruelty.⁴⁷ Such excesses are paired with the great wealth of Etruria: Virgil describes the tunic, woven with golden thread, worn by Lausus (10.818), and mentions the rich iron ores of the Ilva island (10.174). The Etruscan opulence is a key motif in Livy also, who describes how impressed the Romans were on beholding the treasures of the conquered city of Veius (Liv. 5.21.4), and mentions the famous wealth of the Cilnii of Arretium (a town in northern Etruria) (Liv. 10.3).

Virgil and Livy also present the Etruscan behaviour in relation to the sacral sphere as excessive, improper, and substantially 'different' from the Roman norm. Virgil defines Mezentius as 'impious' (*contemptor divorum*, *Aen.* 7.648), and underlines the power of Etruscan haruspices.⁴⁸ According to Livy, 'the Etruscan people were more devoted to religious practices than anyone else, because they excelled in performing such practices';⁴⁹ further, the Etruscans were 'all experts in the interpretation of celestial omens'.⁵⁰ These are far from being positive connotations: the Etruscan devotion and sacral expertise are excessive, 'morbid',⁵¹ and even potentially dangerous; Livy and other writers are keen to narrate episodes in which the Etruscan *haruspices*, experts of the divinatory '*ars haruspicina*', unwillingly favoured the Romans instead of the Etruscans.⁵²

Silius Italicus (c.27–102 CE), a writer engaged in a reworking of Virgil's poetry, remarks on the key motifs of the Roman representation of Etruria in Virgil and Livy. In the *Punica*, probably published before Domitianus' death in 96 CE, Silius describes the Etruscans who participate in the Punic War as allies of Rome. He stresses the

⁴⁵ Virg. *Aen.* 11.736–8: *Venerem segnes nocturnaeque bella / aut, ubi curva chorus indixit tibia Bacchi / expectate daptes et plenae pocula mensae.*

⁴⁶ Ibid. 8.481–2: 'with arrogant government and cruel weapons' (*superbo / imperio et saevis...armis*).

⁴⁷ Ibid. 8.483–8: Mezentius tortured his opponents by 'chaining them together with rotting bodies'.

⁴⁸ The haruspex stopped the Etruscan army from marching against Mezentius, by 'singing the fate' (*fata canens*, *Aen.* 8.499).

⁴⁹ Liv. 5.1: *gens itaque ante omnes alias eo magis dedita religionibus quod excelleret arte colendi eas.*

⁵⁰ Liv. 1.34.9: [Tanaquil is] *perita ut volgo Etrusci caelestium prodigiorum.*

⁵¹ Liv. 39.8.1 presents the introduction in Rome from Etruria of the Bacchanalia 'as the contagion of a disease' (*velut contagione morbi*).

⁵² Liv. 5.21; 5.15, 5; Gell. 4.5; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 9.12, 2–3.

Etruscan expertise in 'divination' practices (8.477), such as the art of interpreting the omens of the thunderbolt (*sacris interpretres fulminis*), and alludes to the Etruscan origin from the wealthy kingdom of Lydia (483), the homeland of the still proverbially rich kings Midas and Croesus. By mentioning Porsenna's pride (478–9), the poet stresses the Etruscan pride; he also connects Etruria with the introduction of both symbols of power adopted by Rome – the *fasci* (484–5), the 'curule chair' (*sella curulis*, 486) and the purple for the senators (487) – and the *tuba* (trumpet, Sil. It. 5.12 f.). The *tuba*, a musical instrument whose sound used to give the signal for the beginning of battles, seems to be the only original Etruscan contribution to the art of war.⁵³

In sum, the representation of the Etruscans in Virgil, Livy, and Silius is constructed by using well-defined *topoi*. The Etruscans use inappropriate weapons, behave in war as hunters, can be defeated by women, and even behave like women – an aspect connected to their wealth and consequent excessive luxury, as well as to their (supposed) oriental origin. Their moral flaws include cowardice, tyrannical pride, cruelty, 'softness', love of pleasures, and a peculiar relationship with sacral practices presented as dangerous and extraneous to the Roman religion.

Literary portraits of 'Etruscan' politicians

This section shows that the ancient biographical accounts of Maecenas, Sejanus, and Otho, three politicians of Etruscan descent lived in the age of the Julio-Claudians, tend to focus on certain specific elements, such as their Etruscan origin, wealth, relationship with their wives and with the emperor, moral flaws, ambition, political careers, and relationship with the sacred. The characterization of these politicians that emerges from their literary portraits is consistent with the Roman characterization of the Etruscans examined in the first part of the paper.

⁵³ Virg. *Aen.* 8.525; Diod. Sic. 5.40.1.

Maecenas

Gaius Cilnius Maecenas⁵⁴ was one of the closest advisers of the Emperor Augustus.⁵⁵ The portrait of Maecenas drawn by the poets within his circle (such as Horace, Propertius, and Virgil) seems to be, at first glance, a rather positive one. They mention his royal blood – his ancestors, the house of the Cilnii,⁵⁶ had been Etruscan kings⁵⁷ – but remark that he belonged to the equestrian order.⁵⁸ Access to the equestrian order was ruled by wealth, so that, in the imperial age, its members were either the noblest and richest members of Italic aristocracy or wealthy freedmen. Maecenas' own opulence was well publicized,⁵⁹ and his largesse towards poets acquired proverbial status in writings by later authors.⁶⁰ However, other contemporary sources, such as Velleius Paterculus, friend to the emperor Tiberius, carefully note how he indulges the indolent pleasures of his private life (*otio ac mollitiis*), 'almost more than a woman' (*paene ultra feminam*) would enjoy such things (Vell. Pat. 2.88.2).

During the difficult times of the civil wars, Augustus gave Maecenas 'charge of everything in Rome and in Italy' (*cunctis apud Romam atque Italiam praeposuit*).⁶¹ While governing Italy, he demonstrated his discretion (*quies*) and his ability to dissimulate (*dissimulatio*) while first exposing and then foiling Lepidus' plot (Vell. 2.88.3). Nevertheless, once Augustus had consolidated his own power, and perhaps after the exposure of the plot instigated by Maecenas'

⁵⁴ On Maecenas, see L. Graverini, 'Un secolo di studi su Mecenate', *RSA* 27 (1997), 231–89.

⁵⁵ Plin. *NH* 37.10; Plut. *Ant.* 35; App. *B Civ.* 4.52, 5.92, 5.99; Cass. Dio 49.13, 51.3, 54.30, 55.7.

⁵⁶ The name Gaius Cilnius Maecenas is in Tacitus (*Ann.* 6.11); Macrobius (*Sat.* 2.4.12) calls him 'emerald of the Cilni' (*Cilniorum smaragde*). On Maecenas's name (and on his belonging to the *gens Cilnia*), see C. Simpson, 'Two Small Thoughts on "Cilnius Maecenas"', *Latomus* 55 (1996), 394–8, and S. N. Byrne, 'Pointed Allusions: Maecenas and Sallustius in the Annals of Tacitus', *RhM* 142 (1999), 339–45, esp. 341 f.

⁵⁷ Maecenas came from a dynasty of Etruscan kings: *atavis edite regibus* ('born of royal ancestors', Hor. *Carm.* 1.1.1); *Tyrrhena regum progenies* ('descended from Tyrrhenian kings', Hor. *Carm.* 3.29.1); *Etrusco de sanguine regum* ('from the blood of Etruscan kings', Prop. 3.9.1). Velleius (2.88.2) writes that he is *splendido genere natus* ('of illustrious ancestry'). According to Horace (*Sat.* 1.6.4), Maecenas' ancestors 'once commanded great legions' (*olim magnis legionibus imperitarent*), but we do not know if he refers to Roman or Etruscan armies.

⁵⁸ Prop. 3.9.1; Vell. Pat. 2.88.2; Tac. *Ann.* 6.11.2. A later source, Martial, calls him *Caesarianus eques* (10.73.4).

⁵⁹ Horace (*Carm.* 3.29.9) urges his patron to *fastidiosam desere copiam* ('abandon luxury, which can become annoying') for a while.

⁶⁰ Martial (8.56) refers to Maecenas' generosity towards the poets of his 'circle'.

⁶¹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.11.2; see also Sen. *Ep.* 19.114.5. On this issue see A. J. M. Watson, 'Maecenas' Administration of Rome and Italy', *Akroterion* 39, 3/4 (1994), 98–104.

brother-in-law, Licinius Murena, he 'allowed' Maecenas – who is described as openly showing his lack of interest in holding public offices⁶² – to retire from public life and to spend the rest of his days in Rome, in a pleasant *otium*.⁶³

Although Maecenas was content with his equestrian rank⁶⁴ and appeared to be indifferent to the idea of dominating Rome, Horace (*Carm.* 3.29.25–6) portrays him as pondering over the organization of the city (*civitatem quis deceat status / curas*). Maecenas is also 'concerned for Rome' (*urbis sollicitus times*, *Carm.* 3.29.27) because of the threat posed by people such as the Seres, the Bactrians, and those living near the Tanais (*Carm.* 3.29.28–9); however, his concerns, which would normally be appropriate for a political leader, appear to be unwarranted and exaggerated, since these peoples inhabited the farthest east of the world.⁶⁵

The stoic philosopher Seneca was a particularly severe critic of Maecenas. He criticized Maecenas' writing style – which, according to Suetonius (*Aug.* 86.2), Augustus considered far too ornate⁶⁶ – and believed it to reflect the personality of the writer.⁶⁷ The philosopher stigmatizes Maecenas' walk⁶⁸ and eccentric clothing,⁶⁹ both of which are considered symptoms of effeminacy,⁷⁰ as well as the fact that Maecenas allowed himself to be escorted in public by two eunuchs during the civil wars (*Sen. Ep.* 19.114.6). The eunuchs were, in Seneca's words, 'more manly than he himself was' (*magis tamen viri*

⁶² In Propertius, Maecenas holds back from the legislative (3.9.24) and military activities (3.9.25 f.) that are the proper occupations for a Roman citizen.

⁶³ According to Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.53.3), Augustus 'allowed' Maecenas 'to withdraw from public life' (*otium permisit*) within Rome itself, which was equivalent to retirement abroad; see also Tac. *Ann.* 3.30.3–4, 14.55.2.

⁶⁴ Prop. 3.9.2; Vell. Pat. 2.88.2.

⁶⁵ The Seres were thought to produce the best silk and iron, and might be identified with the Indians or the Chinese: see Nicholas Purcell, 'Seres', in S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (eds.), *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford and New York, 1996), 1392–3.

⁶⁶ See also Macr. *Sat.* 2.4.12. According to Horace, Maecenas was a history writer (*Carm.* 2.14.9 ff.); see also S. N. Byrne, 'Horace *Carm.* 2.12, Maecenas, and Prose History', *Antichthon* 34 (2000), 18–29.

⁶⁷ Seneca censures the poetic style of Maecenas (*Ep.* 19.114). See also M. Graver, 'The Manhandling of Maecenas: Senecan Abstractions of Masculinity', *AJPh* 119 (1998), 607–32.

⁶⁸ *Sen. Ep.* 19.114.4: *quomodo ambulaverit* ('how he walked').

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 19.114.6 criticizes Maecenas' 'flowing tunic' (*solutis tunicis*), and his habit of delegating some of his official duties, at the time when he was in charge of everything in Rome 'untied' (*discincto*); further, Maecenas wore a cloak wrapped about his head, reminiscent, in Seneca's view, of runaway slaves in a theatrical farce, even when he was judging a cause or delivering a discourse (19.114.6). Martial (10.73.1–4) and Juvenal (12.37–8) also refer to the eccentric clothing of Maecenas.

⁷⁰ *Sen. Ep.* 19.114.4: *delicatus* ('soft'); *Sen. Ep.* 20.40.19; *Eleg. in Maec.* 1.21–26. Juvenal (1.66) refers to Maecenas' indolence by using the term *supinus* ('relaxing'); cf. also Cass. Dio 54.17.5, 19.3, 30.4.

quam ipse, *Ep.* 19.114.6); nevertheless, Maecenas 'refused to hide his vices'.⁷¹ The sexually ambiguous behaviour of Maecenas is also expressed in his love for the actor Batillus,⁷² and in his troubled relationship with his wife, Terentia, for which Seneca is the main source of evidence. Seneca seems to suggest that Maecenas divorced his spouse at least once;⁷³ his concerns over her behaviour caused him insomnia.⁷⁴ According to Suetonius, his love for Terentia was such that he even revealed to her an important state secret – the discovery of her brother Murena's conspiracy – thus provoking the wrath of Augustus.⁷⁵ Furthermore, an ancient source, the Pseudo-Acron (*ad loc.*), affirms that the Licymnia sung of by Horace (*Carm.* 2.12) is none other than Terentia, Maecenas' wife; Horace was celebrating the couple's love, as some scholars have thought.⁷⁶ By presenting Maecenas and his legitimate wife as lovers, whose passion is celebrated by a poet who declares in the same poem that he prefers to sing of Licymnia rather than of glorious deeds, the Pseudo-Acron hints that such conjugal love is excessive (and reproachable). According to later sources, Maecenas feigned ignorance of the relationship between Terentia and Augustus despite his love for her, or perhaps because of it (Schol. Hor. *Sat.* 1.2.64), and 'designated Augustus as heir, even if he was grieved by his relationship with Terentia'.⁷⁷

Maecenas' behaviour degenerated to the point of flouting cult rules. While modern scholars, unlike ancient writers,⁷⁸ define Maecenas as 'Epicurean',⁷⁹ his failure to comply with the rules of Roman religion is passed over in silence. A striking example of his disregard for traditional religious convention is shown by his belief that funeral rites

⁷¹ Sen. *Ep.* 19.114.4: *vitia sua latere noluerit*.

⁷² Sen. *Controv.* 10.8. See also Tac. *Ann.* 1.54.2.

⁷³ Sen. *Ep.* 19.6: *uxorem milliens duxit, cum unam habuerit?* ('he was married a thousand times, though he had only one wife').

⁷⁴ Sen. *Prov.* 1.3.10. On the supposed changeableness of Maecenas (based on Hor. *Carm.* 3.29), see A. J. M. Watson, 'An Attempt at a Psychological Analysis of Maecenas', *Akroterion* 36 (1991), 25–35.

⁷⁵ Suetonius underlines Maecenas' lack of 'discretion' (*taciturnitas*) with his wife (*Aug.* 66.2).

⁷⁶ R. Avallone, *Mecenate* (Naples, 1962), 24.

⁷⁷ Cass. Dio 55.7.5. See also A. Guarino, 'Mecenate e Terenzia', *Labeo* 38 (1992), 137–146; F. Paturzo, *Maecenas il ministro d'Augusto. Politica, filosofia, letteratura nel periodo augusteo* (Cortona, 1999), 170–3.

⁷⁸ Seneca never calls Maecenas 'Epicurean', and Cassius Dio writes that Maecenas despised philosophers (Cass. Dio 2.36), though he attended the school of the Stoic philosopher Arius Didimus (Ael. *VH* 12.25 [Diels, *Doxogr. Gr.* 83.1]).

⁷⁹ E.g. R. Avallone (n. 76), 91; J. M. André, *Mecenate. Un tentativo di biografia spirituale* (Florence, 1991), 184.

were useless,⁸⁰ which would be consistent with the teachings of Epicurus.⁸¹

Sejanus

Born in an Etruscan town (Volsinii)⁸² and into a family that belonged to the equestrian order,⁸³ Aelius Sejanus⁸⁴ was related to Maecenas.⁸⁵ He became Tiberius' trusted advisor,⁸⁶ and the emperor even permitted him to place his own image in theatres and squares,⁸⁷ and allowed the legions to honour the statues of Sejanus.⁸⁸ If Seneca regarded Sejanus as perfidious,⁸⁹ his list of flaws, according to Tacitus, was impressive. Sejanus was 'daring in committing crimes',⁹⁰ deceptive,⁹¹ audacious,⁹² and moved by an excessive and arrogant pride mixed with flattery,⁹³ liberality,⁹⁴ and sycophancy.⁹⁵ He loved luxury (Tac. *Ann.* 4.1.3) to the point where, in his youth, he would prostitute himself for money.⁹⁶ Later, he would commit atrocious crimes⁹⁷ in order to succeed Tiberius on his throne.⁹⁸ For Tacitus (*Ann.* 4.1.3), Sejanus had an unrestrained 'desire' (*libido*) for power, and he points out that the direct cause of Sejanus' downfall was his affair with Julia Livilla, niece of Tiberius. According to his account, Sejanus seduced her⁹⁹ when she was still married to Drusus Gemellus, Tiberius'

⁸⁰ Sen. *Ep.* 14.92.35: *Maecenas ait, / nec tumulum curo: sepelit natura relictos* ('I do not care for funerary monuments: nature buries the dead'). This attitude contravenes the rules of traditional Roman religion on funerary rites.

⁸¹ As witnessed by Diog. Laert. 10.118.

⁸² Tac. *Ann.* 4.1.2. Vulsinii (modern-day Bolsena) was in southern Etruria. Juvenal (10.74) calls Sejanus 'Etruscan' (*Tuscus*).

⁸³ Tac. *Ann.* 4.1.2; Vell. Pat. 2.127.3.

⁸⁴ On Sejanus, see Z. Yavetz, 'Sejan and the Plebs: A Note', *Chiron* 28 (1998), 187–91.

⁸⁵ See Hall (n. 12), 169 and 188, n. 164.

⁸⁶ Vell. Pat. 2.128.4: *ad iuvanda... onera principis* ('to help the emperor with his burdens').

⁸⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 4.2.3, 3.72; Juv. 10.74.

⁸⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 4.2.3; Suet. *Tib.* 65.1.

⁸⁹ Sen. *Cons. in Marc.* 22.5: *perfidus*.

⁹⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 4.12.2: *ferox scelerum*.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 4.3.1: *dolus*.

⁹² *Ibid.* 4.1.3: *audax*.

⁹³ *Ibid.*: *iuxta adulatio et superbia*.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*: *largitio*.

⁹⁵ He tried to ingratiate himself with the Praetorian Guard (*ibid.* 4.2.1), and the senators (*ibid.* 4.2.3).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 4.1.2; Cass. Dio 76.19.5.

⁹⁷ Sejanus incited Julia Livilla to poison her husband, Drusus (Tac. *Ann.* 4.3.3; Suet. *Tib.* 62.1); later, he planned to poison the family of Germanicus (Tac. *Ann.* 4.12.2), and killed several members of the Roman nobility (*ibid.* 4.12.2).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 4.1.1, 3. Tacitus narrates that Sejanus convinced Livilla by offering her 'a share of power' (*consortium regni*, *ibid.* 4.3.3).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 4.3.3, 4.40.2–6.

son.¹⁰⁰ It seems probable that, since Tacitus calls Sejanus the *gener* (son-in-law) of Tiberius (*Ann.* 5.6.2), he and Julia Livilla did in fact marry, because of her insistence.¹⁰¹ Once he lost favour with Tiberius, Sejanus encountered a terrible fate, along with his siblings and friends.¹⁰² Later writers echo this portrayal by Tacitus: Juvenal stresses that Sejanus 'aspired to excessive honours, and sought excessive wealth';¹⁰³ and Suetonius (*Tib.* 65.1) emphasizes his 'plotting' (*res novas moliens*) against Tiberius and his resorting to 'treachery' (*fraus*) in order to eliminate his enemies (*Tib.* 62.1).

Otho

The main authorities for Marcus Salvius Otho's life are Tacitus, Suetonius, and Plutarch. According to Tacitus and Suetonius, the family of the emperor¹⁰⁴ originated in Ferentum.¹⁰⁵ Since this town – today Ferento, near Viterbo – was not a major Etruscan centre,¹⁰⁶ Suetonius' insistence in representing Otho as Etruscan, by writing that Otho's family was said to have been one of the most noble of Etruria, is especially interesting.¹⁰⁷ Otho's great-grandfather, however, belonged to the equestrian order.¹⁰⁸

In his portrayal of Otho, Tacitus (*Ann.* 13.12.1) describes him as a 'handsome' (*decor*) young man, and mentions his idleness as a young boy.¹⁰⁹ Tacitus also declares that the Romans feared Otho's fiery passions (*flagrantissimae libidines*, *Hist.* 2.3.1) and that, owing to his vices, he was thought to be extremely dangerous (*exitior*) to the state (*Hist.* 2.31.1). Otho was infamous for being one of Nero's closest

¹⁰⁰ According to Zonarus, a later source quoted in Cassius Dio (58.3.9), Sejanus was going to marry the daughter of Drusus and Julia Livilla.

¹⁰¹ Tac. *Ann.* 4.39.1. See also J. Bellemore, 'The Wife of Sejan', *ZPE* 109 (1995), 255–66, esp. 258 ff.

¹⁰² Tac. *Ann.* 6.6–9; Suet. *Tib.* 61.

¹⁰³ Juv. 10.104–5: *nimios optabat honores / et nimios posebat opes*.

¹⁰⁴ On Otho, see L. Braun, 'Galba und Otho bei Plutarch und Sveton', *Hermes* 120 (1992), 90; C. A. Perkins, 'Tacitus on Otho', *Latomus* 52 (1993), 848–55; and especially C. L. Murison, *Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. Careers and Controversies* (New York, 1993).

¹⁰⁵ Tac. *Hist.* 2.50.1; Suet. *Otho* 1.1.

¹⁰⁶ The Etruscan settlement at Ferentum had already been abandoned by 590 BCE, before the Romans settled there: see G. Maetzke et al., 'Ferento (Viterbo): Indagini archeologiche nell'area urbana (1994–2000)', *Archeologia Medievale*, 28 (2001), 295–322.

¹⁰⁷ Suet. *Otho* 1.1: Otho was descended from an old and illustrious family and one of the most important of Etruria (*familia vetere et honorata atque principibus Etruriae*).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. Suetonius later writes that Otho's father was believed to have been Tiberius' illegitimate son (*Otho* 1.2). The double-edged story includes Otho in the Julio-Claudian dynasty, but also connects him to the unpopular emperor Tiberius.

¹⁰⁹ Tacitus (*Hist.* 1.13.3) uses the term *incuriose* ('careless' or 'negligent').

friends;¹¹⁰ once he became emperor, this *animosus corruptor* ('audacious corruptor', *Hist.* 1.24.2), committed actions that were significantly against the honour (*contra decus*) of the state (*Hist.* 1.77.1). The list of Otho's flaws, according to Tacitus, includes his attempt to emulate Nero's extravagance¹¹¹ and his cruelty,¹¹² as well as inclinations towards both anger and envy.¹¹³ Just like Maecenas, Otho is proud of his vices (*vitia...gloriatur*, *Hist.* 1.30), which include his servile flattery (*omnia serviliter*), aimed at seizing power (*Hist.* 1.36.3), and his sycophantic behaviour towards soldiers.¹¹⁴

Suetonius focuses on other aspects of Otho's personality, such as his prodigality,¹¹⁵ and the excessive amount of care that he was said to have taken of his body.¹¹⁶ He describes how Otho 'used to smear his face with moist bread...in order to avoid the growth of a beard'¹¹⁷ and depilated his whole body,¹¹⁸ concluding that the emperor 'cared for his person in an almost feminine way'.¹¹⁹ Suetonius links this effeminacy to the rumours of a homosexual relationship between Otho and Nero,¹²⁰ and completes the picture with an account of Otho being taken to the Praetorian headquarters, hidden in a *muliebor sella*, a closed litter such as women used (*Suet. Otho* 6.3). Otho's effeminate tendencies had already been vividly portrayed by Juvenal (2.99), who defined Otho as *pathicus* ('effeminate'), and described him applying moist breadcrumbs to his face even prior to his last battle (*Juv.* 2.107). Moreover, when the satirist renders a description of Otho's approach to war, he does not draw a comparison with a king, but with

¹¹⁰ *Suet. Otho* 2.2: *sumum inter amicos locum tenuit* ('he held the first place among the emperor's friends'). A later source, Eutropius, defines Otho as *Neroni familiaris* (7.17). According to C. Daremberg and E. Saglio, *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines* (Paris, 1873–1919), s.v. *Amici Augusti*, under Augustus and Tiberius, the *amici* or *familiares principis* were those chosen to participate in the *consilia* on a regular basis.

¹¹¹ *Tac. Hist.* 1.13.3: *luxus*. Tacitus remarks that the extravagance of Otho 'would have troubled even an emperor' (*etiam principi onerosa*, *ibid.* 1.21).

¹¹² *Ibid.* 2.31: *saevitia*.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 1.21.1: *ira* and *invidia*.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 1.36.45–6, 80–5; *Suet. Otho* 6.3; *Plut. Otho* 1.2, 3.11–13.

¹¹⁵ *Suet. Otho* 2.1: *prodigus* ('profligate'). According to Suetonius, Otho was heavily in debt (*Otho* 5), and Tacitus mentions his poverty (*inopia*, *Hist.* 1.21.1).

¹¹⁶ For Suetonius (*Otho* 12.1), Otho was a beautiful man, even if he was said to have been not very tall (*modicae staturae*), bow-legged (*male pedatus*), and bandy-legged (*scambus*), as well as being bald and wearing a wig (*galericulum*).

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*: *pane madido linere consuetum...ne barbatus umquam esset [traditur]*.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*: *vulso corpore*.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*: *munditia...paene muliebrum*. He was the first to put scent on the soles of his feet (*Plin. NH* 13.22).

¹²⁰ *Suet. Otho* 2.2. Cassius Dio also mentions his intimacy with Sporus, a former favourite of Nero (*Cass. Dio* 63).

two oriental queens¹²¹ – the mythical Semiramis¹²² and Cleopatra¹²³ – and gives Otho's weapon (*gestamen*) as the mirror (Juv. 2.99).

The Greek writer Plutarch, who must have drawn on Roman writers contemporary to Otho since he narrates anecdotes not found in other texts, draws attention to the Emperor's love of pleasure (*philedonias*), as well as to his prodigality (*Galb.* 19.2). This last feature contrasts with *micralogia* ('stinginess'), the flaw that Otho accused Nero of displaying (*Galb.* 19.3). When comparing Otho to the Trojan Paris, Plutarch points out that, just like the Trojan prince, this Roman emperor won fame only for taking away another man's wife (*Galb.* 19.2): it appears that Otho married Poppea Sabina, who later became Nero's second wife.¹²⁴ According to Tacitus, Suetonius, and Plutarch, Otho seduced Poppea after Nero had asked him to keep her in his house, following her divorce from her first husband,¹²⁵ and then married her (*Tac. Ann.* 13.45.4). Otho later encouraged the affair between his wife and Nero in order to acquire, through her, more influence over the emperor (*Tac. Ann.* 13.46.1). However, Nero did not tolerate any rival, and Otho was appointed to the remote province of Lusitania: a masked exile as perceived by all in Rome.¹²⁶ Nonetheless, Otho still loved Poppea (*ne...quidem immemor amorum*), and one of his first acts as emperor was to restore her statues by a vote of the Senate (*Tac. Hist.* 1.78).

Just like Maecenas, Otho's attitude towards religion contrasts with that expected of a Roman citizen. According to Suetonius, Otho 'did not care for traditional omens' (*nulla ne religionum quidem cura*), to the point that he began his expedition against Galba in spite of an impressive list of unfavourable auspices (*Otho* 8.3). Although he was not interested in the traditional rites of the Roman religion, Otho often publicly celebrated the rites of Isis in the linen garment prescribed by the cult (*Suet. Otho* 12). Also, both Juvenal and Tacitus highlight the fact that it was his faith in astrologers' predictions that convinced

¹²¹ Juv. 2.108–9: *quod nec in Assyrio pharetrata Sameramis orbe, / maesta nec Actiaca fecit Cleopatra carina* ('Neither the quiver-bearing Semiramis in the Assyrian kingdom nor forlorn Cleopatra on ship at Actium did such things!').

¹²² On Semiramis, see A. M. G. Capomacchia, *Semiramis. Una femminilità ribaltata* (Rome, 1986).

¹²³ On Cleopatra, see G. Piccaluga (n. 3), 597.

¹²⁴ There are five accounts of the episode (*Tac. Hist.* 1.13.3–4; *Tac. Ann.* 13.45–46; *Plut. Galb.* 19.2–20; *Suet. Otho* 3.1–2; *Dio Cass.* 66.11. 2–4). See also Murison (n. 104), 75–80.

¹²⁵ *Tac. Hist.* 1.13.34; *Suet. Otho* 3.1: *nuptiarum specie recepit* ('he pretended marriage with her'). See also *Plut. Galb.* 19.2–20.

¹²⁶ *Tac. Ann.* 13.46.3; *Suet. Otho* 3.

Otho to try to seize power¹²⁷ by ordering the murder of Sulpicius Galba.¹²⁸

Although, according to Suetonius, Otho claimed that he had never wanted the war against Galba (Suet. *Otho* 7.10), all of the sources agree that the suicide of the defeated Otho soon after the battle of Bedriacum revealed his courage:¹²⁹ Martial does not hesitate to declare that 'in his death Cato was not greater than Otho'.¹³⁰ Later sources, such as Cassius Dio, rhetorically infer that Otho had a preference for 'a Mucius, a Decius, a Curtius, a Regulus rather than a Marius, a Cinna, or a Sulla' (63), thus implying that Otho would rather have sacrificed himself for the state than dominate it.

Otho, Maecenas, Sejanus, and the stereotype of the Etruscan

The literary portraits of Maecenas, Otho, and Sejanus consistently ascribe to the three politicians similar features, and similar accidents to their careers and marriages. But are such features connected to their Etruscan ancestry? In other words, do our sources represent their behaviour as typically Etruscan? Contemporary authors stress the Etruscan origin in the case of Maecenas; Tacitus and Suetonius carefully note it in the cases of Otho and Sejanus, even if in Otho's case this was somewhat remote. Such stress is hardly accidental: writers appear to have proceeded by way of allusions, making several hints at certain features that Greek and Roman writers ascribed to the Etruscans. These literary portraits are consistent with the representation of the Etruscans in Virgil and Livy in almost all respects. The only difference seems to be the lack of references connecting the three politicians to hunting, a connotation that could thus be one of the means used by Virgil and Livy to represent those Etruscans who had lived in the most remote times of Roman history.

The connection between Etruscans and cavalry, stressed by Virgil and Livy in writing of the mythical Etruscans, becomes, in the accounts of the three politicians, a connection with the equestrian order. This is a double-edged connotation since, even if their families

¹²⁷ Tac. *Hist.* 1.22; Juv. 6.559.

¹²⁸ The ancient authorities unanimously consider Otho responsible for Galba's death: Tac. *Hist.* 1.25 ff.; Suet. *Otho* 6; Plut. *Galb.* 17; Juv. 2.104; Eutr. 7.16, 10.18.3; Cass. Dio 63.

¹²⁹ Suet. *Otho* 9.3, 12.2; Tac. *Hist.* 2.46–50; Plut. *Otho* 10.15–18; Cass. Dio 54.11–15.

¹³⁰ Mart. 6.32: *dum moritur [Catho], numquid maior Othone fuit?*

were old and distinguished in Etruria, they were considered as relatively newcomers in Roman aristocracy.¹³¹

All three politicians are ascribed effeminacy, an ambiguous sexual attribute, and an excessive love for their rather independent wives. Virgil and Livy indeed remark on the effeminacy of the Etruscans, though there are no explicit references to ambiguous sexual behaviour in their work. When Virgil notes that Etruscan mothers had hoped to have the warrior Camilla as their daughter-in-law (*Aen.* 11.582: *optavere nurum*), he may be alluding to the high status ascribed to women in Etruscan society by Greek and Roman writers.¹³²

Representing Maecenas, Sejanus, and Otho as wealthy and as loving luxury and pleasures is consistent with the Greek characterization of the lifestyle of Etruscan elites as exceedingly 'soft', and with the Roman reshaping of such allegations. Plutarch's use of *philedonias* (love of pleasure) and *tryphê* (*Galb.* 19.2) to define the tendencies of young Otho is thus hardly accidental. In the case of Maecenas, scholars of Latin literature, when they write about an 'Etruscan style',¹³³ sometimes draw upon the stereotype of an excessive love for luxury, an eccentricity in clothing, and a tendency to maintain sycophants.¹³⁴ Of course, in Greek and Roman literature, love of luxury, excessive wealth, prodigality, and effeminacy are also presented as typical features of eastern peoples; but the alleged Lydian origin of the Etruscans, so carefully noted by the authors examined, made of the Tyrrhenians an eastern people in western lands.

The three politicians' main flaw is their yielding to their passions, thus lacking the sense of measure expected of (and inherent in the behaviour of) a Roman citizen. This lack of self-restraint extends from love to politics, from writing¹³⁵ to religion, to an excessive attention to clothing and to body care. Such tendencies proved dangerous for Rome, because they were inextricably tied to their thirst for power – is it purely coincidental that all three politicians under examination tried to gain power through murder and/or seduction? In particular, Tacitus, and the erudite Suetonius, may be suggesting through their

¹³¹ Maecenas is 'the most noble, of all the Lydians who inhabit the Etruscan lands' (Hor. *Sat.* 1.6.1–2: *Lydorum quidquid Etruscos / incoluit finis, nemo generosior est te*).

¹³² On Etruscan women, see L. Bonfante, 'Etruscan Women', in E. Fantham, et al. (eds.) *Women in the Classical World* (Oxford, 1994), 243–59.

¹³³ L. Aigner Foresti, 'Quod discinctus eras, animo quoque, carpitur unum (Maec. *El.* I, 21)', in M. Sordi (ed.), *L'immagine dell'uomo politico. Vita pubblica e morale nell'antichità* (Milan, 1991), 201–14.

¹³⁴ J. M. André (n. 79), 184.

¹³⁵ According to R. T. Macfarlane (n. 10), 247, 'the variety of his [Maecenas'] literary output...maintains impressive dimensions'.

literary portraits a connection between the three Etruscan politicians and the tyrannical Etruscan Tarquins, thus expressing their concern about a possible restoration of the monarchy in Rome.¹³⁶ Indeed, the behaviours ascribed to Maecenas, Sejanus, and Otho often coincide with those of the cruel and proud tyrant Mezentius in Virgil, and of the Tarquins in Livy. The Tarquins were famous for their pride,¹³⁷ violence, and cruelty,¹³⁸ their ability to get rid of their opponents by using deception,¹³⁹ their tendency to follow their wives' advice and thus manage to gain power;¹⁴⁰ a peculiar relationship with the sacred;¹⁴¹ and overwhelming ambition.¹⁴²

Maecenas, Sejanus, and Otho tend to behave as Mezentius and the Tarquins did; their alleged ambition, unrestrained passions, and excessive behaviour are condemned because they are presented as threatening Rome's political stability. Thus, the effeminate emperor Otho is compared to Cleopatra and Semiramis, whose actions almost overturned the established world order; or likened to Paris, whose passion led to the destruction of Troy. Juvenal stresses that purple clothing (a clear mark of royalty) befits Maecenas; Sejanus aims at a marriage well above his station.¹⁴³ What is more, all three men had in their hands, albeit briefly, the supreme power of both Rome and Italy. In the case of Maecenas and Otho, this occurred in transition periods (the civil wars), when the established social order was at risk of being overthrown; in the case of Sejanus, when the prince was absent. The hypothetical possibility of a 'return of the Tarquins' – that is, of a

¹³⁶ According to B. Fontana, 'Tacitus on Empire and Republic', *History of Political Thought* 14 (1993), 27, the *Annales* and the *Historiae* 'describe the degeneration of the *principatus* into a *dominatio* and a *regnum*'.

¹³⁷ The last of the Tarquins was known as 'the Proud' (*superbus*, Liv. 1.49).

¹³⁸ Tarquinius Superbus became king using 'violence' (*vi*) and remained in power by terrorizing the Romans (Liv. 1.49: *metu*). His son was famous for the 'violence' (*per vim*) against Lucretia (Liv. 1.57; see also Cic. *Rep.* 2.46).

¹³⁹ Tarquinius Priscus used deception to become king (Liv. 1.35); Tarquinius Superbus used it to conquer Gabii (Liv. 1.53–54; Val. Max. 7.4.2; Plin. *NH* 19.169) and to eliminate a Latin opponent (Liv. 1.51).

¹⁴⁰ Tanaquil spurred her husband Tarquinius Priscus to move to Rome (Liv. 1.34), and to designate Servius Tullius as heir to the throne (Liv. 1.39); Tullia incited Tarquinius Superbus to kill their closest kin (Liv. 1.47).

¹⁴¹ Tarquinius Priscus denied the validity of the augural science (Liv. 1.36), and refused sepulchre to the dead (Plin. *NH* 36.107). Tanaquil was an expert in the interpretation of signs (Liv. 1.34). Tarquinius Superbus caused the destruction of six of the Libri Sibillini (Cic. *de divinat.* 1.22.44), and, after killing his father-in-law, Servius Tullius, denied him a funeral (Liv. 1.49).

¹⁴² Tarquinius Priscus was ambitious (*cupidus honorum*, Liv. 1.34.9); Tarquinius Superbus governed without consulting either the Senate or the Roman people (Liv. 1.49).

¹⁴³ According to Tacitus, Tiberius did not consider Sejanus an adequate match for Julia Livilla (*Ann.* 4.40.2–6).

tyrannical monarchic rule in Rome – explains why, in spite of their often brilliant performances, all three characters' actions can be purposefully portrayed in a negative light, and as potentially dangerous for Rome. It is, then, particularly significant that the later historian Cassius Dio chose to represent the Etruscan Maecenas as the advisor who incited Augustus to restore the monarchy in Rome (52.14–40).¹⁴⁴

Conclusion

In the Roman writers examined, the main characterizing features of the Etruscans are wealth and prodigality, lack of restraint, excessive love for their wives, ambiguous sexual behaviour and effeminacy, and love of luxury, pleasures, and indolence. Other flaws complete the impressive list: impiety (as opposed to the traditional Roman *pietas*), practice of non-Roman sacred 'arts', lack of military ability, and improper use of weapons, whether hunting weapons or Otho's mirror. What is more, the Etruscans are ambitious, and are presented as potential tyrants. The intent of such representations is obviously that of opposing the Etruscans to the (ideal) Roman order (as restated in the Augustan age), which was based on the cultivation of the land, on the military service of landowners and peasants, and on values such as the scrupulous respect of religious rules (*pietas*), frugality, chastity, a rigid definition of gender roles, and the refusal to display one's riches.

In the early imperial age, Etruria was no longer a threat, the Etruscan culture was prestigious, and Etruscan families held great power in Rome, as they had in the late Republican age. Nonetheless, bringing up the non-Roman origins of one's political opponents had become a *topos* in Roman politics, as Cicero's orations illustrate (see *Philippicae* 3.15). Thus, mentioning the Etruscan descent of Maecenas, Sejanus, and Otho, and ascribing to them the characteristics traditionally attached to Etruria by Roman and Greek writers, was an effective rhetorical strategy aimed at throwing a bad light on the political career of these controversial politicians. Maecenas had supported the establishment of a principate to which the senatorial order was hostile, thereby sustaining Augustus' political programme

¹⁴⁴ See Byrne (n. 56), 343.

through the group of poets that he protected and financed.¹⁴⁵ Sejanus carried out the repressive policy instigated by Tiberius.¹⁴⁶ As for Otho, his Etruscan origin is coupled with his representation as a second Nero; starting with Tacitus (*Hist.* 1.13.4), who defines him as *Neronis similis* ('similar to Nero'), all the sources agree on his being the follower of Nero's policy:¹⁴⁷ which explains the hatred of the Senate towards him.

Still, our sources at times praise these politicians, highlighting certain positive qualities that they were said to possess. For instance, Maecenas had proved an excellent governor of Rome and Italy;¹⁴⁸ Sejanus a proficient Praetorian Prefect;¹⁴⁹ and Otho a remarkably honest administrator and brilliant military commander during his enforced residence in Lusitania.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, Tacitus describes Otho's performance in war as 'the opposite of his reputation' (*famae dissimilis*), and depicts him marching at the head of his soldiers, wearing an iron breastplate, ruffled and dreadful to see (*Hist.* 2.11.3), a stark contrast to the fastidious 'fop' that the historian portrayed elsewhere.¹⁵¹

How can we explain the positive traits found in the same texts that criticize them? One possibility is to consider certain pieces of information as falsely positive traits – that is, as a more subtly defamatory portrayal. For example, while all Otho's biographers view the suicide of the defeated emperor soon after the Battle of Bedriacum as exemplifying his courage,¹⁵² Suetonius (whose father, Suetonius Laetus,

¹⁴⁵ Virgil took on the task of writing the *Georgics* because of Maecenas' insistence (Virg. *G.* 3.40).

¹⁴⁶ According to Suetonius (*Tib.* 61.1), after the death of Sejanus, Tiberius became even more cruel than before, thus showing that 'Sejanus had not spurred him on' ('non...ipsum ab Seiano concitari solitum').

¹⁴⁷ Historians report Otho's intention to celebrate Nero's memory (Tac. *Hist.* 1.78), to use the surname *Nero* and restore Nero's statues (Suet. *Otho* 7; Plut. *Otho* 3.1–2), and to marry Statilia Messalina, Nero's widow (Suet. *Otho* 10.4). He also kept Nero's favourites in his service (Cass. Dio 63). As T. E. J. Wiedemann, 'Nero to Vespasian', *CAH* 10 (1996), 268, stresses, Otho tried to win the favour of the Roman plebs 'by representing himself as Nero's successor'.

¹⁴⁸ Velleius (2.88.2) describes Maecenas as 'able and active' (*providens*) and 'skilful' (*agendi sciens*).

¹⁴⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 4.2.1. Sejanus reorganized the Praetorian Guard: L. Keppie, 'The Praetorian Guard before Sejan', *Athenaeum* 84 (1996), 101.

¹⁵⁰ Tacitus praises Otho for 'being scrupulously honest' (*integre santaeque egit*), noting that his ability as governor of Lusitania was unexpected (*Ann.* 13.46.3; also in *Hist.* 1.13.4). According to Suetonius (*Otho* 3.2), Otho governed Lusitania for ten years as questor, and gave proof of 'remarkable moderation and integrity' (*moderatione atque abstinentia singulari*).

¹⁵¹ *nec illi segne aut corruptum luxu iter, sed lorica ferrea usus est et ante signa pedes ire, horridus, incompus* ('[Otho] did not bring shame on [the army's] march by [indulging] indolence or luxury, but he wore a cuirass of iron, marching on foot before the standards, rough, untidy'). Otho was the most brilliant (*splendidissimus*) general of all Galba's supporters (Tac. *Hist.* 1.13.4).

¹⁵² Suet. *Otho* 9.3, 12.2; Tac. *Hist.* 2.46–50; Plut. *Otho* 10.15–18; Cass. Dio 54.11–15.

was military tribune in Otho's army, Suet. *Otho* 10), believes that this act prevented his supporters from continuing the war.¹⁵³ In other words, Otho is shown to be inadequate to his role by giving up when he could still win. However, this reasoning could not explain all the positive traits; we should consider, then, two questions: when exactly do such positive traits emerge in the characters examined? and what make the co-existence of conflicting images possible? All the positive traits seem to emerge from or be related to their office as Roman commanders or administrators, even when such roles were informally held. When these Romans of Etruscan origin are invested with Roman responsibilities – that is, they act in the interest of the *res publica* – they do very well. Even Livy does not deny praise to the military expansion or to the architectural accomplishments of the Tarquins; their fault was the use of tyrannical means to reach such brilliant results. Our sources seem to suggest that Roman politicians of Etruscan ancestry could indeed do well in office, but could easily revert to indolence, effeminacy, or tyrannical behaviour once they left office or aspired to the throne. We should also consider that, by giving a positive evaluation of at least some of the performances of emperors or politicians usually represented as dangerous for Rome, the authors of the texts examined were able to manifest a (cautious) criticism of the political regimes of their own time. For example, the sudden transformation of the profligate Otho into an honest and active administrator could be reinterpreted by re-evaluating his friendship with the Stoic philosopher Seneca, who allegedly saved his life by suggesting his appointment as governor of Lusitania (Plut. *Galb.* 19.9–20.1).

The overall ambivalence of the Roman attitude towards Etruria is particularly evident in the characterization of Maecenas, whose portrayal is far less 'dark' than that of the other two politicians. Portraying Maecenas according to the cliché of the feminized and idle aristocratic Etruscan, as the poets of his circle do, could be read as a way of affirming that he did not represent a serious danger for Augustus (something that the conspiracy of Murena contradicts). And we can think back to Horace praising Maecenas for his approachability, in comparison with a proud descendant of one of the families that overthrew the Tarquins (*Sat.* 1.6, especially 1–19). Being of royal

¹⁵³ Suetonius reports that Otho had a strong reserve force, and that his defeated troops were strong enough to resist further attacks (*Otho* 9.3). Martial remarks that Otho still had a chance of winning, adding that the emperor chose to commit suicide to avoid further conflicts (6.32.1–4).

blood or generous are acceptable qualities – as long as they do not turn into pride or prodigality, as happens with Sejanus and Otho.

If we go back to the *Aeneid*, we find that Virgil's presentation of the Etruscans is ambivalent, too: the Etruscans are allied with Aeneas, and the poet includes Mantua, his home town, in the catalogue of Etruscan cities (Virg. *Aen.* 10.199–200). Mantua, a town geographically located in Gallia, is given a (real or fictional) prestigious origin, and portrayed as the result of the 'melting' together of several peoples, though dominated by the Etruscan element.

In conclusion, negative and positive representations of Etruria co-exist in Roman and Greek writers of the early imperial age, and such representations can be used (most often) polemically or (sometimes) to stress valuable features of Etruria. What is more, the writers considered here (as well as the politicians) were Roman citizens who played with traditional clichés. A more comprehensive study of literary representations of the Etruscans would help to re-evaluate the complexity of Etruscan ethnic characterization in Roman (and Greek) writers, whose elusive implications we can understand only by uncovering connections between texts. For example, the stress of ancient authorities on women's relatively high status in Etruria could be re-examined by taking into account the significance that Roman (and Greek) writers wanted to attach to the risks inherent in the inversion of gender roles. In this way we could thus more fully appreciate why Camilla or Cloelia came successfully to confront the Etruscans at war.

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