

ETRUSCAN SEA-GOING VESSELS FROM THE 10TH TO 5TH CENTURY BC

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Introduction

Several authors have made suggestions about an independently developed Etruscan ship-type besides the Aegean (Greek) and the Near Eastern (Anatolian, Cyprian and Phoenician) types.¹

A wide region of origins for this Etruscan boat-type was suggested, ranging from the Black Sea to Etruria itself.² Other authors are denying any differences between Greek, Phoenician, Etruscan or Roman ships and state that during any given period in the Mediterranean, all nations used the same ship-types.³ Knowledge about sea-going vessels in Etruria is almost exclusively based on iconographic evidence, as the few excavations of merchant vessels with a possible Etruscan origin gave some clues about details of the construction but not about the form of the hull.

The iconographic evidence exists of some early clay and metal boat-models and an amount of pictures on ceramics and other objects, ranging from the 11th till the 2nd century BC.

Most of this material was collected and described by J.W. Hagy in 1986.⁴

Now regarding Hagy's overview, a distinction in three periods can be made:

- (1) 11th to 9th century BC;
- (2) 8th to 5th century BC;
- (3) 4th to 2nd century BC.

This article is concerned with the first two periods.

¹De Vries and Katzev 1972: 43.

²Miltner 1948: 115-122.

³Tor 1904: 24; Hagy 1986: 221.

⁴Hagy 1986: 221-250.

1. From the 11th till the 9th century BC

From this period a collection of clay and bronze boat-models exists. These models were found in graves from Caere, Tarquinia, Praeneste and Chiusi. Unfortunately, the exact origins of the most interesting models is unknown.

In the north as well as in the south Etruria has rich metal resources like iron, tin, copper and silver.⁵ Already in the Late Bronze Age, these metals were probably traded to Northern and South-Eastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean. Cretan and Mycenaean imports are known from Southern Italy,⁶ while Eastern Mediterranean swords with a T-shaped hilt were introduced in Etruria during the transition between the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age.⁷

At the Etruscan coast there are more than enough islands and bays that could be used as harbours for overseas trade.⁸ Italy also became the intersection of land and sea trade-routes between Europe and the Near East during the first part of the first millennium BC, like, for instance, in the case of the amber trade.⁹

A clay boat-model from a grave at Tarquinia, dated between the 10th and the 9th century BC (Fig. 1) closely resembles the pictures of the ships of the so-called "Sea Peoples" depicted at Medinet Habu in Egypt (Fig. 2). Boat-models of this "double figure-headed" type can be traced all over Central Europe between the 11th and the 8th century BC (Fig. 3).¹⁰

From the story of Wenamon¹¹ it is known that one of the groups belonging to the "Sea Peoples", the Tjeker, settled, after their defeat against Ramses III in 1175 BC, in Dor which is nowadays in Israel. There they were involved in metal trade. As Philistia and Phoenicia recovered most rapidly after the collapse of the centralized Bronze Age economies,¹² it is likely that the Tjeker or other groups of the "Sea Peoples" were involved in the metal trade with Etruria. Especially since the general use of iron started a search for new sources after the 11th century BC.

Interestingly, the 10th century BC was also the period of the Pelasgian

⁵ Pallottino 1955: 79.

⁶ Macnamara 1970: 241.

⁷ Stary 1979: 186.

⁸ Pallottino 1955: 78; Behn 1909: 1-16.

⁹ Sherratt 1993: 363.

¹⁰ De Boer 1991: 43-50.

¹¹ Breasted 1906: 565.

¹² Sherratt 1993: 364.

thalassocracy in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹³ The Pelasgians were possibly connected to the "Sea Peoples" and also to Etruria.¹⁴

One of the other boat-models, this one with only one *acrostolion* (figure head), shows holes along the sides (Fig. 4). These holes probably contained oars. As the vessels of the "Sea Peoples" at Medinet Habu were depicted with masts and sails as well as oars, all the Etrurian models probably represent multi-purpose vessels which could be used for trade, war and piracy according to the most profitable situation.

Bronze model-boats of the same type are known from the Nuragic culture at Sardinia and dated to the 8th century BC. They were placed in Etruscan graves (a.o. Vetulonia).¹⁵

This supports the general opinion that Sardinia was a source of metal and a stepping stone to the Etrurian resources. Strabo names the Sardinians as pirates originally coming from Etruria.¹⁶

2. From the 8th till the 5th century BC

From the 8th century BC onwards, the difference between pictures of merchant vessels and warships becomes more clear. Some material, e.g. boat-shaped bucchero vases and other ceramics from the 7th century BC¹⁷ cannot be used for identification of the ships.

Merchant vessels

During the 8th century BC, trade contacts between the Near East and the Western Mediterranean became regular, especially owing to the growing importance of the Assyrian empire and its trading posts. As the Phoenicians and Cyprians had a longer tradition in long-distance trade, they probably benefitted most from this situation.¹⁸

The early Greek colony of Pithecussae was, according to the archaeological material, a multi-ethnic community with strong connections to the Levant.¹⁹

It is clear from grave-finds that during the Orientalizing period (end of the 8th, beginning of the 7th century BC) Near Eastern influence in Etruria is much stronger than the Greek one. Assyrian objects (jewelry

¹³ Myres 1906: 88.

¹⁴ Athenaeus XV.12; Strabo V.2.3; Strabo V.4.8; Hencken 1968: 147.

¹⁵ Hagy 1986: 223.

¹⁶ Strabo V.2.7.

¹⁷ Hagy 1986: 237-8.

¹⁸ Markoe 1992: 61-84; Sherratt 1993: 368-9.

¹⁹ Buchner 1982: 277-98.

and arms) are dominating among the richer graves.²⁰ Ceramics decorated with meander motifs of Lydian origin were introduced in Etruria.²¹

From the six pictures of merchant-vessels that are found in Etruria between the 8th and the 6th century BC, two types can be recognized.

The first one is depicted on a bronze razorblade from Bologna, dated to the 8th century BC (Fig. 5), and on the engravings of a stele at Novilara, the so-called "Picene ships" (Fig. 6).²² These are pictures of a Phoenician hippos (although the stern of the "Picene ships" is not upcurved) as they were called by the Greeks (Fig. 7).

The hippos was an extremely successful merchant-vessel with a horse-head as an *acrostolion* and used from the 12th (a picture on a LH IIC vessel from Skyros) to the 1st century BC. The hippos is a.o. depicted on a wall relief from the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad and on a brooch from Spain (both 7th century BC). It was mentioned by several Greek authors and was even used on the trade with East and West Africa.²³

The second type of merchant-vessel depicted in Etruria is a round-ship on a graffito from Veii and two proto-Corinthian vases produced in Tarquinia. These ships can be compared with the merchant-vessels depicted on several 7th century BC White Painted IV pots from Cyprus (Fig. 8).²⁴

Excavated wrecks of possible Etrurian merchant-vessels

Before any conclusion about an ancient wreck can be drawn, one has to take into account that it is most of the time extremely difficult to identify the nationality of the crew and the ship as the cargo as well as the personal belongings of the crew can be taken from any harbour that was visited.

Three wrecks of merchant-vessels with a possible Etruscan origin were excavated:

(1) The wreck near Cap d'Antibes, between Cannes and Nice, excavated by G. Pruvot.²⁵ From this ship the hull was not preserved but it should have been 12 to 15 m long and the cargo consisted of Etruscan bucchero ceramics and some Phoenician objects. The wreck is dated to the 6th century BC and could have been a hippos.

(2) The second wreck was found near the Giglio islands, south of

²⁰ Stary 1979: 189-91.

²¹ Woudhuizen 1982: 99-100.

²² Bonino 1975: 11-20.

²³ Johnstone 1980: 94-5; Strabo II.3.4; Torr 1895: 113.

²⁴ Hagy 1986: Fig. 11; Biers 1977: 153-5; Westerberg 1983: Figs. 53, 54, 55.

²⁵ Pruvot 1972: 16-9.

Elba, and carried ceramics from Greece, Etruria and Carthago. It was excavated by the Oxford University between 1982 and 1984 and was dated to the 6th century BC. A part of the hull showed it to be a sewn vessel.²⁶

(3) The third wreck was found at Bon Porté, in the neighbourhood of Saint Tropez. It was discovered in 1971 and excavated in 1974. It is dated to the 6th century BC and was also a sewn ship.²⁷

Warships

It is remarkable that the first pictures of warships in Etruria appear in the second half of the 7th century BC, towards the end of the Orientalizing period.

During the last decades of the 7th century BC, there is evidence for widespread seaborne commerce and Etruscan pottery is extensively found in North Africa, Sicily and Southern France.²⁸

The most famous picture of a warship in Etruria is the krater of Aristonothos from the 7th century BC. It was probably made by a Greek artist in Southern Italy. It shows a battle between a Greek pentecontor and a plump and heavy roundship (Fig. 9). In fact, the whole idea of a different Etruscan ship-type is more or less based on this picture. Other authors see the heavy round ship as an armed merchant-vessel attacked by Greek pirates. Hagy, however, published a photo of the Aristonothos krater together with the drawing of a picture from an 8th century BC fibula from Sparta (Fig. 10). This picture shows the same battle scene, only the non-Greek vessel is less plump and resembles a Phoenician warship depicted on the Kuyundjik relief at Nineveh (7th century BC). So probably the scene on the Aristonothos krater was a known theme in the Greek world and the plumpness of the non-Greek vessel was an artistic liberty.

Another interesting battle scene is found on a 6th century BC krater from Caere. Here a battle is depicted between a shark-like warship (probably a Greek pentecontor) and a heavy galley with an enormous *acrostolion* (Fig. 11). Although the idea is normally that the *acrostolion* is grossly overemphasized by the artist who made the picture, the ship can be compared with a number of pictures on knee-caps from Glasinač (nowadays in Bosnia) (Fig. 12).²⁹

In fact all representations of warships till the 5th century BC show

²⁶ Bound & Vallintine 1983: 113-22.

²⁷ Jeltsin & Carraze 1980: 70-2; Basch 1981: 244; Poney 1981: 225-44; Joncheray 1976: 88-9.

²⁸ de Vries & Katzev 1972: 39; Sherratt 1993: 369-74.

²⁹ Benač & Covič 1957: 305; Stipcevič 1977: 180.

heavy galleys (probably two-decked pentecontors)³⁰ with an extended *acrostolion*, like the one on the Polledrara vase from a 6th century grave at Vulci (Fig. 13).³¹

Phoenician pentecontors and hemiolias were more heavily built than Greek ones³² and they still had an *acrostolion* (even till the 3rd century BC). This *acrostolion* was only rudimentary preserved for the Greek ships known from geometric ceramics.³³ This is shown on the arthistorical reconstruction of a geometric ship by Buchholz.³⁴

Another difference between Greek and Phoenician warships was the ram. At Phoenician galleys a bronze battering ram was nailed to a protrusion of the prow. This is shown on the Kuyundjik relief (Fig. 14) and found on an excavated Punic wreck near Sicilly.³⁵

In contrast, the Greek ships from the Geometric period show prows with a long slender ram, probably a prolongation of the keel and developed from a cutwater or a protection against damages at beaching.³⁶ According to Basch the Greek ships from the Geometric period probably were sewn vessels in which case ramming caused less damage to the ship as a whole than to Phoenician ships which were built with the more rigid tenons and mortises construction.³⁷ The ships on the Polledrara vase, a 6th century BC vase from Caere, a 6th BC century krater from Caere and a 5th century BC grave marker from Bologna clearly show the Phoenician type of ram.³⁸

The heavy construction of the Etruscan and Phoenician galleys may also have been echoed in a story of Herodotus. He writes that during the sea-battle of Alalia, where the Etruscans and the Carthaginians fought together against the Greek Phocaeans, the Phocaeans won the battle but lost 40 ships whereas the remaining 20 had lost their ram.³⁹

A much later parallel for this situation is found by Caesar. Here the ram failed as a weapon against the heavy constructed sailing-ships of the Celtic Veneti.⁴⁰

³⁰ Gray 1974: G 70; Meyer 1986: 148.

³¹ Koster 1923: Pl. 8; see for other pictures of galleys Hagy 1986: Figs. 21, 26, 39.

³² Basch 1969a: 161.

³³ Basch 1969b: 230; Basch 1975: 207; Göttlicher 1985: 43.

³⁴ Buchholz 1987: 161.

³⁵ Basch 1975: 201-28, a ship dating from the Hellenistic period.

³⁶ Basch 1975: 204.

³⁷ Basch 1975: 205.

³⁸ Hagy 1986: Figs. 26, 27, 28 and 39.

³⁹ Herod. 1.166.2.

⁴⁰ Caesar, *BG* III.13, 14.

Conclusion

Iconographic evidence, unfortunately not supported by historical evidence, gives the impression that most of the ships, depicted in Etruria between the 10th and the 5th century BC, are more closely paralleled in the Near East than the Greek world. This is supported by the archaeological finds in Etruria, especially those till the 7th century BC.

Interesting is that till the first half of the 7th century BC only merchant-vessels or multi-purpose ships are modelled or depicted. A solution for this problem could be that before the Orientalizing period only ships from foreigners, probably most Phoenician or Cyprian traders, are shown.

After the second half of the 7th century BC only, merchant-vessels as well as warships are depicted. This could be an indication that during the second half of the 7th and especially the 6th century BC the Etruscan city-states kept a fleet of warships to protect their commercial and political influence in the area. This is supported by the growing amount of Etruscan ceramics in Sicily and Southern France. Their influence could even have been radiated to Illyria.

The parallel between the Etrurian and Phoenician warships could have been caused by close contacts with Carthago which was also interested to keep the Greek colonization out of the Western Mediterranean. The battle near Alalia against the Phocaeans is an example of this cooperation.

The lost sea-battle against the Greeks from Cumae and Syracuse in 474 BC made an end to the Etruscan sea-power⁴¹ and Etruria probably became a part of the Hellenic economic world.

At least, it should be clear that a difference existed between the shipbuilding traditions in the Greek world (a.o. Attica, Corinth, Samos) and those in the Levant (Phoenicia).

ABBREVIATIONS

- IJNA The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology and Underwater Exploration.
PPS Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society.
JHS Journal of Hellenic Studies.
MM The Mariner's Mirror.

⁴¹ Diod. Sic. XI.51.1.

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Fig. 1. Clay model from Tarquinia, c. 9th century BC [from Montelius 1895].



Fig. 2. Ship of the "Sea Peoples" depicted at Medinet Habu [from Torr 1894].



Fig. 3. Pictures of bronze and clay models, found at Satu Mare, Szatmar, Belgrad and Tarquinia [after Kossack 1954, Hencken 1960 and Bouzek 1985].



Fig. 4. Clay model from Etruria, c. 1100-900 BC [from Montelius 1895].

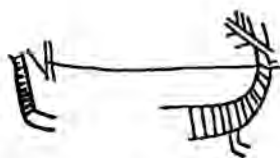


Fig. 5. Drawing on a bronze razor from Bologna, 8th century BC [from Brizio 1889].

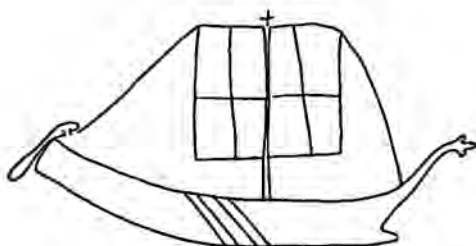


Fig. 6. Hippos of the stele from Novilara, 7th century BC [from Bonino 1975].

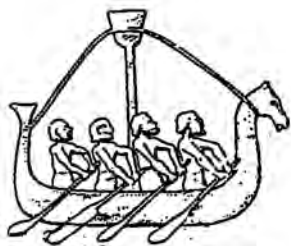


Fig. 7. Phoenician hippos.

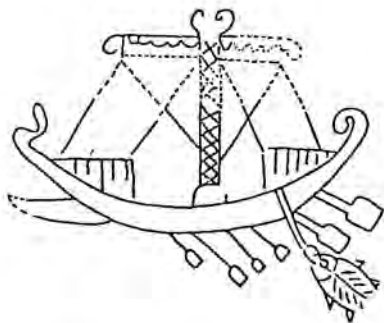


Fig. 8. Graffito from Veii and drawing from Cyprus, both 7th century BC [from Hagy 1986].

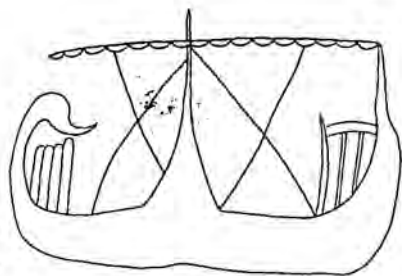


Fig. 9. Sea battle on the krater of Aristonothos.

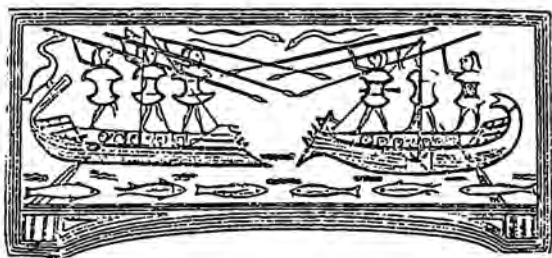


Fig. 10. Fibula from Sparta, 8th century BC [from Charbonneaux 1932].

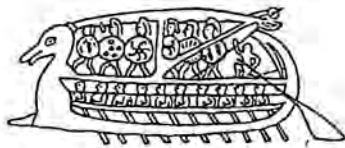


Fig. 11. Galley on a krater from Caere, 6th century BC
[from Hagy 1986].

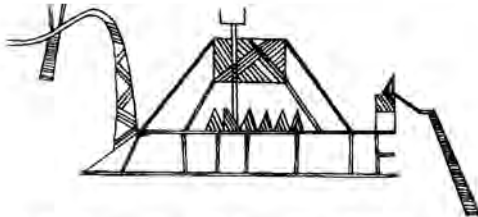


Fig. 12. Drawing on a knee-cap from Glasinač,
7th century BC [from Benač 1957].



Fig. 13. Ship on the Polledrara amphora, 6th
century BC [from Koster 1923].

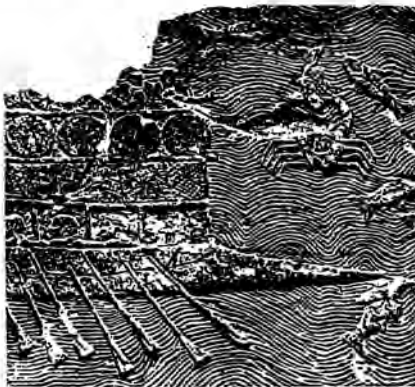


Fig. 14. Detail from the Kuyundjik relief at the British Museum.