

The Etruscan Discipline

Etruscan religion and superstition had a profound influence on the Romans. Because the Romans suppressed the culture of the Etruscans, their literature exists only in fragments and lore quoted by Roman authors—and there is little of that; but we can glean some hints of Etruscan viewpoints from the way the Romans talked about them.

Cicero's *On Divination* famously attempted to debunk the practice of consulting the gods for their will, known as "divination" or "soothsaying"—the Roman practice of which was derived from the Etruscans, who were still regarded as the experts on consulting the gods even in Cicero's day (1st century BCE). (His basic point that reason is preferable to superstition is illustrated in the question: "Assume, next, that the inquiry is as to the best form of government, or as to what laws or what customs are beneficial and what are harmful, will you call soothsayers out of Etruria to settle the question, or will you accept the decision of men of eminence chosen for their knowledge of statecraft?")

In the course of his argument, he scornfully described the Etruscans' own beliefs regarding the origin of soothsaying—that it derived from the teachings of a boy-like prophet unearthed by a farmer while plowing his field. The religious texts recording the revelations of Tages (and a few other prophets) were the foundation of *haruspicia*, the Etruscan practice of consulting the gods by systematically seeking messages in the skies and the organs of sacrificed animals. The legend of Tages was also mentioned briefly in Ovid (1st century BCE), as an axiomatic example of something surprising.

One example of what survives is a brief discussion of lightning by Pliny the Elder (1st century CE); in his comprehensive study of the natural world, he detailed what he knew of of the Etruscan discipline as it related to this phenomenon.

Source: Cicero, *On Divination* 2.50-51. Translation: [W. A. Falconer](#) (1923). Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.553. Translation: [A. S. Kline](#) (2000). Pliny, *Natural History* 2.138-143. Translation: [H. Rackham](#) (1952).

Cicero, On Divination 2.50-51

50 It seems useless to say more about soothsaying. However, let us examine its origin and thus we shall very readily determine its value. The tradition is that, once upon a time, in the district of Tarquinii [*an Etruscan city not far north of Rome*], while a field was being ploughed, the ploughshare went deeper than usual and a certain Tages suddenly sprang forth and spoke to the ploughman. Now this Tages, according to the Etruscan annals, is said to have had the appearance of a boy, but the wisdom of a seer. Astounded and much frightened at the sight, the rustic raised a great cry; a crowd gathered and, indeed, in a short time, the whole of Etruria assembled at the spot. Tages then spoke at length to his numerous hearers, who received with eagerness all that he had to say, and committed it to writing. His whole address was devoted to an exposition of the science of soothsaying. Later, as new facts were learned and tested by reference to the principles imparted by Tages, they were added to the original fund of knowledge.

This is the story as we get it from the Etruscans themselves and as their records preserve it, and this, in their own opinion, is the origin of their art. 51 Now do we need a Carneades [*a skeptic philosopher, known for attacking dogmatic doctrines*] or an Epicurus [*proponent of empiricism—that the senses are the only reliable guide to knowledge*] to refute such nonsense? Who in the world is stupid enough to believe that anybody ever ploughed up—which shall I say—a god or a man? If a god, why did he, contrary to his nature, hide himself in the ground to be

uncovered and brought to the light of day by a plough? Could not this so-called god have delivered this art to mankind from a more exalted station? But if this fellow Tages was a man, pray, how could he have lived covered with earth? Finally, where had he himself learned the things he taught others? But really in spending so much time in refuting such stuff I am more absurd than the very people who believe it.

Ovid, Metamorphoses 15.553

This strange event [*the transformation of Hippolytus just recounted*] amazed the nymphs, and the Amazon's son was no less astounded, than the Tyrrhenian [*Etruscan*] ploughman when he saw a fateful clod of earth in the middle of his fields first move by itself with no one touching it, then assume the form of a man, losing its earthy nature, and open its newly acquired mouth, to utter things to come. The native people called him Tages, he who first taught the Etruscan race to reveal future events.

Pliny, Natural History 2.138-143

138 The Etruscan writers hold the view that there are nine gods who send thunderbolts, and that these are of eleven kinds, because Jupiter hurls three varieties. Only two of these deities have been retained by the Romans, who attribute thunderbolts in the daytime to Jupiter and those in the night to Summanus, the latter being naturally rare because the sky at night is colder. Etruria believes that some also burst out of the ground, which it calls 'low bolts,' and that these are rendered exceptionally direful and accursed by the season of winter, though all the bolts that they believe of earthly origin are not the ordinary ones and do not come from the stars but from the nearer and more disordered element: a clear proof of this being that all those coming from the upper heaven deliver slanting blows, whereas these which they call earthly strike straight. 139 And those that fall from the nearer elements are supposed to come out of the earth because they leave no traces as a result of their rebound, although that is the principle not of a downward blow but of a slanting one. Those who pursue these enquiries with more subtlety think that these bolts come from the planet Saturn, just as the inflammatory ones come from Mars, as, for instance, when Volsinii, the richest town in Etruria, was entirely burnt up by a thunderbolt. Also the first ones that occur after a man sets up house for himself are called 'family meteors,' as foretelling his fortune for the whole of his life. However, people think that private meteors, except those that occur either at a man's first marriage or on his birthday, do not prophecy beyond ten years, nor public ones beyond the 30th year, except those occurring at the colonization of a town.

140 Historical record also exists of thunderbolts being either caused by or vouchsafed in answer to certain rites and prayers. There is an old story of the latter in Etruria, when the portent which they called Olta came to the city of Volsinii, when its territory had been devastated; it was sent in answer to the prayer of its king Porsina. Also before his time, as is recorded on the reliable authority of Lucius Piso in the first book of his Annals, this was frequently practised by [*the second Roman king*] Numa, though when [*the third king*] Tullus Hostilius copied him with incorrect ritual he was struck by lightning. We also have groves and altars and rites, and among the other Jupiters, the Stayers and Thunderers and Receivers of Offerings, tradition gives us Jupiter the Invoked {Elicius}. 141 On this matter the opinion of mankind varies, in correspondence with our individual dispositions. It takes a bold man to believe that Nature obeys the behests of ritual, and equally it takes a dull man to deny that ritual has beneficent powers, when knowledge has made such progress even in the interpretation of thunderbolts that it can prophecy that others will come on a fixed day, and whether they will destroy a previous one or other previous ones that are concealed: this progress has been made by public and private experiments in both fields. In consequence although such indications are certain in some cases but doubtful in others, and approved to some persons but in the view of others to be condemned, in accordance

with Nature's will and pleasure, we for our part are not going to leave out the rest of the things worth recording in this department.

142 It is certain that when thunder and lightning occur simultaneously, the flash is seen before the thunderclap is heard (this not being surprising, as light travels more swiftly than sound); but that Nature so regulates the stroke of a thunderbolt and the sound of the thunder that they occur together, although the sound is caused by the bolt starting, not striking; moreover that the current of air travels faster than the bolt, and that consequently the object always is shaken and feels the blast before it is struck; and that nobody hit has ever seen the lightning or heard the thunder in advance. Flashes on the left are considered lucky, because the sun rises on the left-hand side of the firmament; and their approach is not so visible as their return, whether after the blow a fire springs from it or the breath returns when its work is done or its fire used up.

143 In making these observations the Etruscans divided the heaven into sixteen parts: the first quarter is from the North to the equinoctial sunrise (East), the second to the South, the third to the equinoctial sunset (West), and the fourth occupies the remaining space extending from West to North; these quarters they subdivided into four parts each, of which they called the eight starting from the East the left-hand regions and the eight opposite ones the right-hand. Of these the most formidable are those lying between West and North. Hence the line of approach and the line of retirement of thunderbolts is of very great importance. It is best for them to return to parts in the region of sunrise. 144 Accordingly it will be a portent of supreme happiness when they come from the first part of the sky and retire to the same part—a sign that history records to have been vouchsafed to the dictator Sulla; but all the others are less fortunate or actually direful, in accordance with the division of the actual firmament where they occur. Some people think it wrong to give or to listen to reports of thunderbolts, except if they are told to a guest or a parent.