

An Economic Explanation for the Republican Colonies of Southern Coastal Etruria

The 3rd century B.C. marked a period of transition as the city-states of Etruria entered into alliances with Rome, most at the cost of a portion of their territory. In a majority of cases, the territory confiscated was the coastal fascia. Within a century, the foundation of several Roman colonies had reorganized the Tyrrhenian coast. Some were created ex novo, while others were built directly atop Etruscan predecessors. Both ancient and modern accounts have emphasized the military function of these colonies, stressing their utility in securing the Tyrrhenian Coast against the real danger of the Punic Wars, and then the imagined danger of a Selucid-Carthaginian alliance (Salmon 1970). Other accounts, while not abandoning the military explanation for the deduction of the colonies, stress their use in extending citizenship to Roman allies and replenishing the force available for military service (Harris 1971). Both of these explanations address the initial reason for the deduction of the colonies, but they fail to take into account the profound implications for the development of internal social structures of clientage and dependence, as well as for the articulation of Etruscan relationships with Rome that resulted from the deductions.

In addition to their military function, these colonies served as a mechanism of economic control over the conquered territory of Southern Etruria. Their position, many occupying the sites of former Etruscan ports, created a Roman monopoly that forced Etruscan elites into dependence on Roman communities for access to the symbols of prestige and wealth necessary to maintain their social position. Elites within Roman Etruria were obligated to reorganize the economic basis of their legitimacy by acquiring ties to the new Roman dominated networks of wealth-finance, or to rely on the control afforded by a staple-finance economy (D'Altroy and Earle 1985; Earle 1994). Both options attracted Etruscan adherents.

This paper will examine the function of the Etruscan coastal colonies as gate-keepers over external trade and will also detail the process whereby Etruscan elites altered patterns of consumption to procure status-reinforcing items from Rome via the newly built road network, as opposed to their traditional overseas sources. For such an examination, recourse will be had to a number of ethnographic examples of gateway communities in wealth-finance economies (eg. Hickerson 1996). That such a dramatic shift in the orientation of the Etruscan economy took place is well documented by the recently published results of the Ager Cosanus / Albenga Valley survey (Carandini and Cambi 2002). This paper will attempt to answer the question of whether it is possible to see such a reorientation as the result of concerted and sustained Roman policy in Coastal Etruria or rather as the result of a series of historical accidents.

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