

**WHO WERE  
THE ROMANS?**

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**WILLIAM RIDGEWAY**

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# THE BRITISH ACADEMY

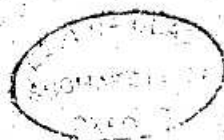
## Who were the Romans?

By

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Fellow of the Academy

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## WHO WERE THE ROMANS?

By WILLIAM RIDGEWAY

FELLOW OF THE ACADEMY

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It has commonly been held by writers on Roman history, since Mommsen wrote, that the Romans were an homogeneous people, there being no ethnical distinction between Patricians and Plebeians. This view has certainly the advantage of simplicity, but the charm of simplicity has often proved as fatal in problems of history as in those of Natural Science. For the deeper we penetrate into the inwardness of things, the more complex do all the phenomena of Nature appear, and in no department can this be affirmed with greater certainty than in all that appertains to Man.

The ancients themselves give a very clear and coherent account of the various elements in the population of Upper Italy in the early part of the first millennium before our era.<sup>1</sup>

Dionysius of Halicarnassus gives us very valuable information on the early ethnology, and though his authority has so often been treated with contempt by modern writers because he wrote in the latter half of the first century before Christ, it must not be forgotten that he cites explicitly from writers who lived centuries earlier, and whose works are otherwise lost to us probably for ever.

First of all there were the 'Aborigines', as they are termed by Dionysius (following Cato and still earlier writers), and secondly there were the great tribes of Siculans and Umbrians. The Umbrians and Siculans seem to have been closely related, the Siculans being the earlier wave which had advanced down from the Alpine regions, whilst their kindred Umbrian tribes were constantly pushing them on further south. The Aborigines were being continually hard pressed by both the Siculans and Umbrians, and those of them who had maintained their freedom for the most part dwelt along the Apennines, into which they had been driven by their powerful invaders from the richer lands of the plains. When the settlers

<sup>1</sup> Ridgeway, *Early Age of Greece*, vol. i. pp. 231 seq.

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from Greece landed in Italy at the mouth of the Po (where some of their number founded Spina), that region was chiefly in the hands of the Ombrioi (Umbrians), and in dread of these the Greeks made friends with the Aborigines. The latter were only too glad of aid against their powerful foes, and the combined forces managed to defeat some of the Umbrians, and took their town Cortona, which served henceforward as a base of operations. According to the traditions the Greeks, with the help of the Aborigines, founded many important towns, among which were Agylla, afterwards known as Caere (*Cervetri*), Pisa, Alsion, Falerii, and various others.

Next came the invasion of the Lydian Tyrseni from Asia Minor, for it is impossible to admit Mommsen's view that they were Rhaetians from the Alps, which has no other foundation except Corssen's guess that the name Rasenna is identical with Rhaeti.

Apparently both the Greek settlers and their allies the Aborigines were glad of the coming of the Tyrsenians, for they were in sore need of assistance against the ever-increasing encroachments of the Umbrian tribes. The new combination of Tyrsenians, Pelaagian settlers, and Aborigines was very effective in checking for a long period the advance of peoples from the Alps. For the Etruscans are said to have conquered more than three hundred Umbrian towns.<sup>1</sup> Henceforth the Umbrians only held their independence in the region called Umbria in the classical period, though doubtless forming a considerable element in the population of all the region up to the Alps. But though the men from beyond the Alps had been checked for a while, the day came when the Celts, the close kinsfolk of the Umbrians, swarmed over the Alps into the valley of the Po, as the Siculans and later the Umbrians had done many centuries before. By s.c. 390 the Etruscan power had suffered a catastrophe from which it was destined never to recover, while even Rome herself, after the disaster on the Allia, fell for the moment into the hands of the Gauls. Bought off by Roman gold the Gauls retired from the south side of the Tiber, but they established themselves over almost all Northern Italy extending as far south as Sena Gallica and Bononia. In due time the shattered remains of the once powerful Etruscan confederacy fell before Rome, as did also the great Samnitic tribes, the most vigorous descendants of the Umbro-Sabellian stock, whom we first meet at the dawn of history. Besides the Etruscans and Gauls, we hear in the historical period of another people, who not only maintained themselves in the mountainous region of which Genoa may be regarded as the centre, but in all North-Western Italy and in South-

<sup>1</sup> Pliny, *N. H.* iii. 5, 8.

Western France. These are the people known to the Roman writers as *Ligures*, and to the Greeks as *Ligydes*. As they occupy the same mountainous area as that assigned to the Aborigines by Dionysius, and as Philistus of Syracuse says that the *Ligydes* were expelled from their homes by the Umbrians, there is no doubt that the Aborigines of Dionysius and Cato are none other than the *Ligydes* or *Ligurians* of Philistus and other writers.

Let us now test the credibility of the statements of the ancient historians by the criterion of the actual material remains which modern excavations have brought to light throughout Upper and Central Italy. A survey of these remains other than those of post-Roman date will show (i) a series of remains associated frequently with Roman coins and Latin inscriptions which are indubitable proofs that these belong to the Roman period. (ii) In certain places, as for example at Bologna, are found graves containing the remains of men of large stature, with long iron swords and other gear similar to those found on the battle-fields where Caesar defeated the Helvetii and Boii, along the Alpine passes, and in the graves of Gaulish warriors in the valley of the Marne and elsewhere; these objects are often distinguished by a style of ornament well known wherever the Celts made their way in the centuries between B.C. 400 and A.D. 1, commonly termed the *La Tène* period, but by some 'late Celtic'. (iii) At an earlier level than the remains just named appear, for instance at Bologna, series of graves perfectly distinct not only from those just described, but also from those of a still earlier period, by their shape, decoration, and method of disposing of the dead. The latter are never cremated as were the *Rhaeti*, but are laid in the tomb. The true Etruscan tomb (for Etruscan assuredly these are) is a chamber entered by a door in the side, though this form is not found north of the Apennines, for in the Etruscan cemetery at Certosa near Bologna the graves are large pits without a side entrance, into which one has to descend from above. They are rectangular, with the long sides running east and west: they contain a large oaken chest with a lid fixed by iron nails. The skeleton lies within the chest with its feet to the east. Many are seated with arms and legs extended.

(iv) In the famous cemeteries of Bologna, below the graves which have been last described, come a large series readily distinguished from those of all the later periods. These all belong to the Early Iron Age, usually termed the *Villanova* period by the Italian archaeologists, from the discovery of a large number of its characteristic remains at the place of that name near Bologna. The antiquities of



this culture<sup>1</sup> are widely spread over Upper Italy, and differ essentially not only from the later periods just described, but also from a still earlier epoch. They show a great advance in metal work. The cemeteries of this age reveal cist-graves, the bottom, sides, and top being formed of flat unbewn stones, though sometimes there are only bottom and top slabs. The dead were burned: the remains are usually in urns, each grave containing as a rule but one ossuary. Sometimes the vessel is covered with a flat stone, or a dish upside down, sometimes the urns are deposited in the ground without any protection. The vases are often hand-made, and adorned with incised linear ornament, but the bones, especially in later times, were often placed in bronze urns or buckets. Mycenaean influences are seen at work in the region round the mouth of the Po, but here, as we have just seen, the Pelasgians of Thessaly had planted Spina.

Though iron is making its way steadily into use for cutting weapons, flat, flanged, socketed, and looped axes of bronze are found in considerable numbers. Brooches of many kinds, ranging from the most primitive safety-pin fashioned out of a common bronze pin, such as those found at Peschiera, through many varieties are in universal use. Representations of the human figure are practically unknown, but models of animals of a rude and primitive kind are very common, probably being votive offerings. These are closely parallel to the bronze figures found at Olympia, where representations of the human figure are still comparatively rare. Almost all the Olympian bronzes of this type were found at the same level, and in one particular part of the Altis at Olympia near the Heraeum and Pelopium, and they belong to the Geometric or Dipylon period. At Olympia likewise many brooches were found, and these too of types which can be paralleled in Italy.

There can be little doubt that the Villanova culture had commenced in the Bronze Age, for in a considerable number of cemeteries belonging to that period the dead were cremated and not inhumed, as was the case in the preceding epoch to which we shall next turn. This difference in burial rites indicates *prima facie* a difference of race. The brooches were in use before the end of the Bronze Age, as is shown by the discovery of primitive safety-pins in settlements of the Bronze Age, as at Peschiera.

(v) The researches of the Italian antiquaries during the last half-century have collected a vast body of information respecting the earliest stages of human culture in Northern and Central Italy, and we are now conversant with its essential characteristics. The

<sup>1</sup> Ridgeway, *op. cit.*, vol. i. pp. 237-8.

earliest stage is that revealed in the lake-dwellings of the plains of the Po, usually termed the Terramara.<sup>1</sup> *Terramara* is the term applied to a substance looking like a mixture of clay, sand, and ashes, arranged in differently coloured strata—yellowish-brown, green, or black—found in large flattish mounds. These artificial deposits occur over the provinces of Parma, Reggio, and Modena. Agriculturists had long used these mounds for manure, but in 1861 Strübel showed that they were really the sites of pile-dwellings. Like remains have now been discovered all over Upper Italy, in Latium, and even as far south as Tarentum. The antiquities found in these habitations show that their earliest occupants were still in the Neolithic period, but the great majority of the remains belong to the Copper and Bronze Ages. They comprise vessels of earthenware, both large and small, and of manifold shapes, some of which correspond to those types found in the Balkan and Danubian regions, and also in Spain. The larger vessels are of coarse clay, roughly kneaded, and quite unglazed. The smaller vessels are made of a finer paste with thin walls and a smooth blackish surface. There are many articles made of bone and horn, comprising needles, pins, ornamented combs, and other objects. Stone axes, chisels, and spear-heads are not common, but there are numbers of rubbers, mealing-stones, and grooved spheroidal stones. Of copper and bronze there are numbers of flat axes, awls, chisels, spear-heads, knives, crescent-shaped razors, combs, pins, and needles. The flat celt is the earliest type of metal axe, being modelled from the stone axe which it superseded. Iron is not yet known, neither is glass nor silver found, and indeed there is but one doubtful object of gold. In all the earlier habitations brooches, rings, and bracelets are absent.

From the evidence now to hand, it is clear that these people dwelt in lakes and marshes, rearing pile-dwellings like the Stone and Bronze Age people of Switzerland, Southern Germany, and many other parts of Europe. At the time of their first occupation they were still employing stone for all cutting purposes, but at no long time afterwards they had learned to use copper, and later still bronze, for cutting and other important implements, whilst stone was only retained for meaner purposes. Their dead were buried in a contracted posture lying on the side or sometimes sitting. The Terramara civilization is probably contemporary with that seen in the earliest strata at Hissarlik.

Now history tells us that a series of peoples corresponding to the different classes of material remains just enumerated have in their

<sup>1</sup> Ridgeway, *op. cit.*, pp. 234 sqq.

turn played a rôle in the story of Upper and Central Italy. Romans, Gauls, and Etruscans held Upper Italy. There can be no doubt that our classes (i), (ii), (iii) represent the relics of the Romans, the Gauls, and the Etruscans. As the Villanova (iv) period precedes the Etruscan, we have in the Villanova antiquities the remains of the Umbrian-Siculan tribes. Behind the Villanova or Umbrian culture lies (v) the Terramara. But we have just learned from Dionysius that Upper Italy had been occupied by a people whom he terms the Aborigines, and that these people had in part been conquered by the Umbrians. Now Philistus of Syracuse tells us that the Ligyes were driven from their homes by the Umbrians and Pelasgians, from which it appears that the Aborigines of Dionysius are none other than the Ligyes or Ligurians so well known in Roman history. The Aborigines are said to have continued to hold their own in the Apennines, and it is in that region that through historical times the Ligurians have dwelt uninterruptedly, extending from Genoa, not only to the Maritime Alps, but as far as the Rhone, though largely intermixed with Celtic tribes from beyond the Alps. The Ligurians of Roman times<sup>1</sup> were a small, active, hardy, dark-complexioned race. Though Spain was occupied principally by Iberic tribes, whom I venture to think were the close kinsmen of the Ligurians, nevertheless in North-East Spain the Ligyes proper had long had a foothold, for according to Thucydides it was the pressure of this people that had caused a body of Iberians from the River Sicanus to migrate to Sicily. These Ligyes occupied all Narbonese Gaul at the time of the founding of Massalia, for the Phoceans obtained possession of that famous town by the marriage of their captain to the daughter of the native Ligurian chief. Nor is there wanting evidence that they had once occupied the Po region, and even the Alpine districts, for Livy<sup>2</sup> mentions a Ligurian tribe called Libui, who, down to the coming of the Celtic Cenomanni, dwelt near Verona, and they are probably to be regarded as forming all through the ages, whether Umbrian, Pelasgian, Etruscan, or Roman had the mastery, the main element in the population of all Italy. Just as they bordered on the Iberians in the west, so on the north-east they merged into the Illyrian tribes, who may also be regarded as their kindred. Strabo points out that the Ligurians were carefully to be distinguished from the Celtic tribes of the Alps, although he also tells us that their manner of life was identical with that of their neighbours.

Let us now pass south of the Tiber and examine the literary

<sup>1</sup> Ridgeway, *op. cit.*, vol. i. pp. 240 and 375-6.

<sup>2</sup> v. 35.