

BOOK REVIEW

The Etruscans. By LUCY SHIPLEY. London: Reaktion Books, 2017. Pp. 213. Hardcover, \$25.00. ISBN 978-1-78023-832-6.

These are heady times for students, scholars, and fans of the Etruscans. After more than a decade in which Sybille Haynes' magisterial *Etruscan Civilization: A Cultural History* (Malibu 2000, rev. edn. 2005) was the only up-to-date, single-volume study available in English, we now have five more: a brief overview by Christopher Smith (Oxford 2013); three companions/handbooks edited by Jean Turfa (London 2015), Alexandra Carpino and this reviewer (Malden, Mass. 2015), and Alessandro Naso (Berlin 2017); and the volume under review here.¹ Like Smith's book in the Very Short Introduction series, Lucy Shipley's volume in the "Lost Civilizations" series is geared toward a lay audience. However, Shipley addresses that audience far more expressly and often than Smith, since her book (like others in its series) "considers not only their history but [also] their art, culture and lasting legacy and asks why they remain important and relevant in our world today."

The book is organized into three parts: front matter (including a chronology and prologue); the main body (in eleven chapters); and end matter (references, further reading, acknowledgements, and an index). The chronology itself clearly marks out Shipley's popular style and engagement with contemporary issues, for in addition to including all of the milestones in Etruscan history as well as their *Nachleben*, it also lists people and events of broad interest, from the death of Ötzi ("the Iceman") to the election of Rome's female mayor ("First female ruler of Rome since Tullia"). In the prologue she briefly summarizes the modern binary thinking which frames the Etruscans, like other "lost" ancient peoples, as either seductively familiar or shockingly foreign. As she states, "The purpose of this book is to inspire you to ask questions, to find out more: about the Etruscans

¹ In this context, readers will also want to note the recent publication of Gary D. Farney and Guy Bradley's *The Peoples of Ancient Italy* (Berlin 2017). Furthermore, this is not to neglect the many important overviews in other languages, such as Giovannangelo Camporeale's *Gli Etruschi: storia e civiltà*, 3rd edn. (Turin 2011).

themselves, and the making and manipulation of their legend” (16). She also makes clear here her intent to explode the “Etruscans-as-lost-civilization myth” by relying primarily on archaeological evidence.

To that end, each of the subsequent chapters begins by using a single object or site by which to trace the chapter’s theme. Those themes are: “Why do the Etruscans Matter?” (1); “Where is Home?” (2); “Ostrich Eggs and Oriental Dreams” (3); “Pots and Prejudice” (4); “Super Rich, Invisible Poor” (5); “To be a Woman” (6); “Safe as Houses” (7); “Sex, Lies and Etruscans” (8); “Wrapped up Writings” (9); “Listening to Livers” (10); and “Facing Oblivion” (11). So in the final chapter, for instance, she begins with some musings about the universality of death and the Etruscans’ “morbid reputation” before shifting to the discovery of the Tomb of the Infernal Chariot at Sarteano in 2003. After discussing both the wider archaeological context and the painted iconography of this fourth-century BCE tomb in some detail, she pivots to a discussion about the ways in which Etruscan culture (especially demons) bled into Roman, Renaissance, and even contemporary culture (e.g. the *Twilight* series). She then returns to the Etruscans proper, in particular Seianti Hanunia Tlesnasa, whose remains were preserved in a sarcophagus decorated with her portrait image and which enabled the staff at the British Museum to create a 3D facial reconstruction that showed her to be “entirely ordinary and familiar” (178). The study of skeletal remains thus holds out much potential for humanizing the Etruscans in this way: from reanimating their original appearances to reconstructing their diets and physical health to settling (possibly) the quarrel over their origins.²

The other chapters similarly evince Shipley’s ability to bridge deftly the ancient evidence and modern debates, and to shift focus seamlessly from the big picture to captivating details. She writes in an engaging, breezy style, rarely lingering long over a particular work or structure or debate, which interested readers can pursue further in the copious, up-to-date references (as well as the section on further reading). The chapters are short and well-illustrated, the majority in color. In the event of a future (paperback) edition, however, the illustrations should be numbered and the figure numbers inserted into the text; as they currently sit, sometimes dislocated pages from their discussion, their relevance—even with their current brief captions—will not always be evident to the general public.

² See also now M.J. Becker and J.M. Turfa, *The Etruscans and the History of Dentistry: The Golden Smile through the Ages* (London 2017).

All told, Shipley's book accomplishes its mission with aplomb: it will not only hold the interest of students and scholars alike, but also speak in powerful ways to the interested lay reader. Indeed, if there is one book among the recent spate of works on the Etruscans that is likely to win over the popular imagination—one as alive to their distinct character and accomplishments as their lost legacy and muddled afterlives—Lucy Shipley's book is surely it. For *The Etruscans* demonstrates that new facts can be more interesting than old fiction.

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