

An Etruscan empire in the Mediterranean.

Antiquities, cultural models and national identities in 18th-century Italy

Early Draft

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In the mid 18th century, southern Italy became a favourite destination for European travellers. Their interest stemmed from the idea that it was a magical place, locked in its own past, where one could rediscover a marvellous world that was lost elsewhere. Travellers from all over Europe were still stopping in Florence and Rome, but by now - attracted by the ruins of Pompeii - they were also going beyond Naples to Sicily. The Greco-Roman vestiges were an important attraction, but did not by themselves justify such a demanding journey. The tourist guides of the time suggest that the image of a Southern Italy portrayed in dark colours and made fascinating by its social backwardness also played an important role. In this case, anthropology prevailed over antiquity, even if there was almost nothing authentic in this search for a different world, different in large respects from Europe. In any case, the journey was an obligatory stage for the elites of Europe: knowledge of the arts, history, geography and antiquity was considered necessary so that, back home, these men could exercise the political and cultural primacy that their social status assigned them.

One example among is Roger Wilbraham, of an old English noble lineage, born in 1743 in Nantwich, who had enrolled at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1760. In 1763 he had qualified as a barrister, and in 1765 he obtained a *Bachelor of arts*. In that same

year he became a fellow at Trinity College and graduated in 1767. Wilbraham travelled to Italy soon after receiving his *bachelor's* degree: he visited Florence - here we see him gazing rapturously at Venus de' Medici in Johan Zoffany's *Tribuna of the Uffizi*. He then went on to Rome, where he was accompanied on a tour of the city by James Byres, a Scottish Jacobite architect and antiquarian enthusiast, who alternated between selling art objects and acting as a cicerone for Britons passing through the city. Together with Byres, Wilbraham planned a trip to southern Italy, which started in mid-March 1766 and probably ended around July.

As I will try to demonstrate, the journey of the two was, however, very different from the others. Here we sketch a brief biography of Roger Wilbraham and keep in mind that his return to his homeland opened up for him a wealthy life, one that he was destined to spend in literary idleness, but also to cross paths with politics. Indeed, he came to it reluctantly and late, in 1786, when he was elected MP for the constituency of Helston and then from 1790 for that of Bodmin, both in Cornwall. He remained in parliament until 1796. In those years - soon dominated by the French Revolution - he was a supporter of Fox against Pitt's policy of all-out war on France. For this reason, he probably ended up losing his seat. Thus, the Napoleonic Wars would return him to the mere pleasure of studies: he was a member of numerous academies, including the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries, a linguistics enthusiast and always cultivated a deep interest in Italy. He owned one of the best Italian-language libraries in the UK, specialising in 16th and 17th century authors. His passion for Italian literature brought him into contact with the poet Ugo Foscolo, who frequented his salon during his exile in London. In 1817, Wilbraham wrote to him these elegant words in Italian:

avete avuto sempre la bontà di sciogliere moltissimi miei dubbi e di correggere parecchi errori particolarmente riguardanti la lingua e la letteratura del vostro bel paese

[you have always had the goodness to dispel many of my doubts and correct several errors particularly concerning the language and literature of your beautiful country].

These words reveal the importance of Roger Wilbraham's youthful journey to Italy and allow us to remember the man who had played an important role in his formation. James Byres is not new to scholarly interest: he was born in 1733 in Aberdeen, the son of a Scottish Catholic aristocrat who, following the defeat of the Stuart pretender at Culloden, had taken him with him to France. James had then returned to Scotland to save the family properties that were in danger of being confiscated, but had soon joined his family, who had followed the Stuart Pretender to Rome. Here he had practised painting and architecture with only modest results, and he took up acting as a guide for British aristocrats escorting them to the artistic sights of Rome, a job that was much more lucrative than selling his art. In the role of cicerone he made good money, because his guided tours became a must for British people passing through Rome. It seems that he charged three times as much as other guides, and he also replenished his earnings from the sale of art objects to his clients.

Opinions about his work as cicerone - as always – were discordant. Some complained of verbosity and pedantry, but others appreciated his competence. Among the latter was, for example, Edward Gibbon, who in his memoirs recalls the days spent visiting monuments with James Byres, “a Scotch antiquary of experience and taste” adding that he stopped listening after a while. In fact, Gibbon also stated that 'in the daily labour of 18 weeks the powers of attention were sometimes fatigued' and he preferred to continue visiting the city alone. But this is Gibbon we are talking about, and so - with all due proportion to all the others, often lacking a specific knowledge of the ancient world - Byres at the time passed for a tutelary deity in the study of antiquity.

He wanted to conquer a space in antiquarianism and his attention soon turned to the Etruscan world. The season seemed propitious, because the publication of *De Etruria regali* by the Scotsman Thomas Dempster, published posthumously in Florence in 1723-24, had launched the fortunes of Etruscan scholarship. Above all, the discovery of the tombs of Corneto, today's Tarquinia, had aroused great interest. Anton Francesco Gori published the *Museum Etruscum* in 1737, which was soon harshly criticised by

Scipione Maffei's *Della nazione etrusca* (1739), but the violent controversy made the site a place of great attraction. As a matter of fact, it seems that Winckelmann visited it many years later, in 1758, followed by Thomas Jenkins in 1761, who launched a successful excavation campaign and gave an account of it at several Roman academies. In 1765 the Italian architect Giambattista Piranesi was in Corneto and returned there again the following year: this time he was with James Byres, Roger Wilbraham and the Polish painter Franciszek Smuglewicz, whom Byres had asked to make drawings of the tombs at Corneto.

The small expedition probably had different plans. Piranesi was at the time in controversy with the French scholar Mariette, who in 1764 had rejected his thesis about the existence of an indigenous Roman architecture. He claimed that the presence of very ancient and impressive structures in Italy did not prove the artistic abilities of the Romans, since they were built by the Etruscans (who, Mariette assumed, were also Greek in origin). Instead, Byres and his people were worried by the resourcefulness of Jenkins, a businessman with a passion for antiquarianism, who was suspected of spying for the London government at the court of the Stuart Pretender. I do not believe that Byres, though a Catholic and Jacobite, cared about Jenkins' political profile. Instead, he was more interested about how Jenkins' excellent relations with politics could favour him in writing a history of the Etruscans for English-language readers.

A letter from Byres to William Hamilton, British ambassador in Naples, but also a great antiquarian, sheds light on his intentions. In September 1766 Byres reveals to him his intention to write a *History of the Etruscans and their Antiquities*, because he was sure that archaeological sites and antiquarian studies would allow the Etruscan problem to be tackled in a new way. According to Timothy Mowl, 'in 1767 Byres's Etruscans would have had no competition and would have been hailed as a revelation'. I do not know if this is true, but there is no doubt that this was Byres' ultimate hope. In any case, however, the letter to Hamilton is also important from a chronological point of view, as it was written immediately after the conclusion of the journey he made to Southern Italy with Wilbraham. The journey was therefore not planned to

accompany Wilbraham on his Grand Tour, but was thought by Byres as a decisive step towards writing the history of the Etruscans.

In confirmation of this reading of Byres and Wilbraham's journey we have Winckelmann's testimony. He was at the time superintendent of antiquities in Rome, knew Byres, but had no sympathy for him because he considered him an improvised scholar. In 1767, he drew a harsh portrait of Byres in a letter to the Prussian baron Johann Hermann von Riedesel, who himself had just returned from a trip to southern Italy. I translate from German:

Byres and his companion did not - I am told - encounter the same hospitality [than you], but I understand it. To, such a hypochondriac, fearful and deranged human being I would certainly not give me the idea of offering him my home and my table; like all Britons, he will always retain an aversion to this nation.

In short, Winckelmann despised the arrogance with which the British arrived in Italy and showed a condescending attitude towards its people. However, in the case of Byres, his disdain went even further: it was not only the human profile that disturbed him, but also the cultural dilettantism. In an earlier letter, written to his friend Yves Marie Desmarets on the 14 July 1766, Winckelmann refers to the journey that Byres and Wilbraham had just made and expresses a patronising judgement towards them.

I will not translate this time, because Winckelmann writes in French

Un Anglois que vous avez connu ici, nommé Villebrain, a fait le voyage de la Sicile, accompagné d'un habile architecte ecossois, M. Byres. Ces deux voyageurs n'ont eu en vue que les antiquités qu'il ont recherchées avec soin à Corneto dans le pays des anciens Tarquiniens: ils ont pénétré dans l'intérieur du pays pour rechercher les vestiges de l'ancienne Enna, mais ils n'ont trouvé qu'une tour carrée bâtie par les Sarrasins

This letter is well-known and has been quoted by Brinsley Ford, but it does not seem to me that he has interpreted it in the most appropriate way. In fact, Winckelmann's words not only confirm that the trip to Sicily followed the research conducted in Corneto, but also say that Byres and Wilbraham had gone to the island to find a clear trace of the presence of Etruscan people there.

This is an important point, because it indicates that Byres was embracing the theses on Etruscan antiquity that were widespread at the time. Much has been written on this aspect and I will not dwell on it in detail. I only wish to recall that the interest in the Etruscans had begun in the years of Gastone de' Medici and was aimed at exalting the indigenous values of Tuscany. Then, Etruscanism had accompanied the claim of the new Lorraine dynasty to play a prominent role in the whole peninsula. The identity use of the Etruscan past is confirmed by the prelate Mario Guarnacci, who between 1767 and 1772 published a work with a significant title: *Origini italiche o siano Memorie istorico-etrusche sopra l'antichissimo Regno d'Italia, e sopra idi lei primi abitatori nei secoli più remoti*. The title is revealing: Tuscany was at the origin of Italy, because it had been inhabited since the most ancient times by a people that had dominated the entire peninsula, had pushed into the Mediterranean and had given civilisation even to Greece itself. The Romans, however, had destroyed it and voluntarily erased its memory because they did not want to recognise that their civilisation was actually Etruscan. Guarnacci's intentions were clear: on the one hand, by insisting on the antiquity of Tuscany, he wanted to reaffirm its cultural primacy of the whole of Italy, but on the other hand, by emphasising the Etruscan origins of civilisation, he distanced himself from Winckelmann's neoclassicism and proposed another possible explanation of the genesis of civilisation.

Byres was fascinated by Guarnacci's reconstruction, which had long been circulating in the cultural circles of mid-eighteenth-century Rome. We know that he had himself written a summary of Guarnacci's work, the title of which is itself revealing: *Reasons and authorities that prove that before the Roman Republic, the empire of the Etruscans extended throughout Italy and beyond*. He then followed his trail when he began writing

his work on the Etruscans: in the few existing pages Byres says that Africa and Europe were once united, that the Mediterranean had originated from great telluric movements and that the Etruscans had dominated the entire Mediterranean world before the Romans erased them from history.

These pages, written after the trip to southern Italy in the company of Wilbraham, offer the unique opportunity of reading the notes taken by Byres for the occasion in a different way. David Ridgway has already mentioned them, but I believe a few more considerations can be added. Firstly, let us not forget that the voyage went from Rome to Agrigento passing also through Malta and Gozo, but its continuation is not known, because the notebook breaks off on the description of the remains of Agrigento. In any case, the travel notes do not summarise a route in the footsteps of classical antiquity, because after the obligatory stops at Pompeii and Paestum, the two visited a number of places that were not part of the Grand Tour route. As the map shows, Byres and Wilbraham were in Sicignano degli Alburni, Polla, Lagonegro, Lauria, Cosenza, Rogliano, Monteleone, Seminara, Mileto and Nicotera. From there they reached Calabria ultra and stayed in Bagnara, Scilla and Reggio. But the journey developed mainly in eastern Sicily: the two visited Scaletta Zanclea, Roccalumera, Savoca, Forza d'Agrò Sant'Alessio Siculo, Taormina, Giardini, Giarre, Mascali, Acireale, Catania, Nicolosi, Lentini, Augusta, Syracuse, Avola, Noto, Pachino to reach Capo Passero, from where they embarked for the island of Malta, then on to Gozo and from there to Agrigento.

In the course of the journey, Byres paid particular attention to volcanic activity: he only admired Stromboli from afar, but described the eruptive activity of Vesuvius and made an excursion to Mount Etna in the aftermath of a minor telluric upheaval, the detailed description of which seems to be the most significant moment of the entire journey.

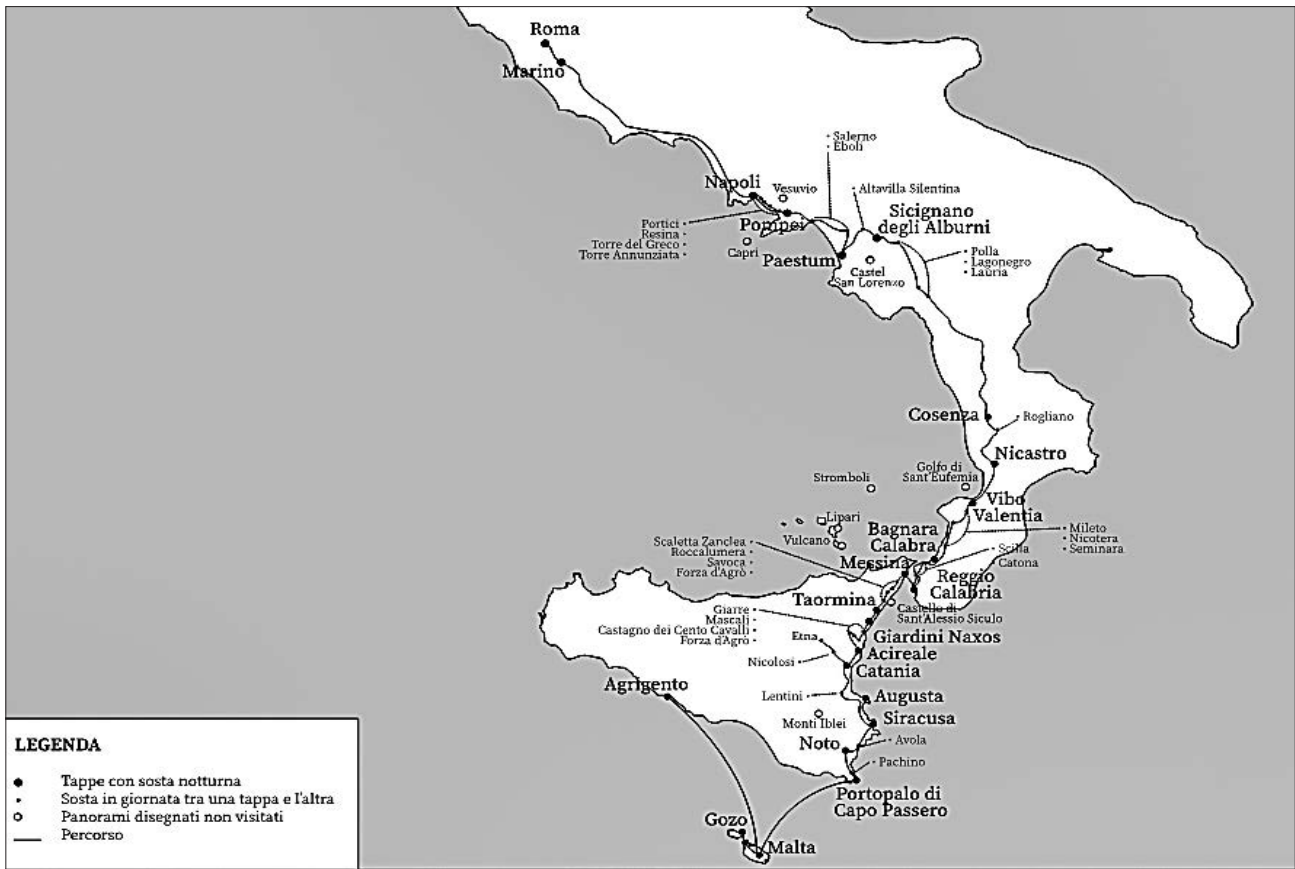


Fig. 1. - The path of James Byres and Roger Wilbraham in Southern Italy.

Alongside this interest, there was also a great regard for the stone types and fossil elements that could date the southern territory, as well as archaeological finds that signalled the presence of different peoples in southern Italy. The first indication comes from a visit to the collection preserved at the Carthusian monastery of Padula, where Byres notes the presence of Etruscan vases that confirm the Tyrrhenian identity of Campania in ancient times. But the most significant notes are those dedicated to the Prince of Biscari's collection in Catania: the presence of Greek, Etruscan and Egyptian artefacts suggests these words to Byres

... we saw the Museum of Prince de' Biscari which is very large and complete in

sculpture [...] he has an excellent collection of Etruscan vases some very ancient found at Camarina some with Etruscans, some with Egyptians and some with Greek figures on them and with Greek and Etruscan inscriptions. Which I think shows that these nations had great communications together and borrowed their arts from one another.

In short, Guarnacci's theses seemed to be validated: Sicily had been joined to the peninsula, had had the same civilisation as southern Italy and had been inhabited by people of Etruscan origin. Byres' focus on volcanology was explained in the same way: he believed he could prove, on the account of Pliny's and Strabo's testimonies, that the Etruscans had first reached the Aeolian Islands and then - following a devastating eruption of Stromboli - had passed with the Siculians to eastern Sicily. Moreover, the passage to Malta was also intended to verify the arguments of Scipione Maffei, who doubted the existence of finds testifying to the presence of Phoenicians on the island³⁶. And whose artefacts then, if not the ubiquitous Etruscans?

On the other hand, the same search had animated almost all the stops during the voyage: in Campania Byres and Wilbraham had successfully searched for Etruscans and had continued to do so in Calabria, as far as Reggio - which a local tradition held to be of Tyrrhenian origin, like Messina - to continue the same search in Sicily. Not surprisingly, they had combed the entire area inhabited by the Siculians and then pushed on as far as Agrigento, which at the time was mistakenly considered the place with the greatest number of Etruscan vases found. To all this is added the missing piece mentioned by Winckelmann, i.e. the passage to Enna, the traditional borderland between Sicanian and Sicilian Sicily. In that case, too, Byres and Wilbraham were in search of an Etruscan presence, which was evidently rumoured (and indeed still rumoured today). Their search, however, led to nothing, because they only found a tower, which at the time was believed to have been built by the Arabs and instead dated back to the years of Frederick II of Swabia.

And yet, precisely for these reasons, it is not surprising that Byres prepared a trip to London in search of subscribers to publish his history of the Etruscans. The work was

to prove that the Etruscans were at the basis of Mediterranean civilisation and that only their defeat before the Romans had erased them from history. These are his words

... the Romans as they conquered the different states of Italy, especially the Etruscans, destroyed their books and records as they afterwards did with those of the Carthaginians. Fearing that posterity should receive any account of their actions other than the one they chose to give themselves, or envious of the high antiquity of some of these nations in comparison with their own ...

Based on these notes, Sullivan has recently suggested how, with an easy analogical play, Byres used the category of anti-Romanism to speak of the sad fate of his Scottish homeland. The son of a Jacobite who had been present at Culloden, he had, in short, proposed the story of the Etruscans as an allegory of the union suffered by Scotland by the crown of England. The hypothesis is intriguing, but perhaps too ambitious for a man who always remained closed within the reassuring horizon of erudition. Instead, it seems to me more likely that Byres resorted to anti-Romanism primarily to substantiate his idea that the Etruscans were the progenitors of classical civilisation. On the other hand, any possible allusion to Scottish nationalism fell on deaf ears: the work found no subscribers and remained unfinished, although Byres did not resign himself to failure. Even in 1796, when Byres had already returned to Scotland, the *Gentleman's Magazine* recalled that

at Tough, in Aberdeenshire, resides Mr. Byres who for the last thirty years lived chiefly at Rome where he was well known and deservedly respected for his taste, learning and integrity. He proposed to publish the Etruscan Antiquities of Corneto, the ancient Tarquinium, in subscription, but with what success does not appear.

However, these kind words did not conceal the failure of the initiative and it is not difficult to ascribe the defeat to the concomitant triumphs of neo-classical taste, which

- as is well known - only referred to the Greco-Roman dimension. On the other hand, Winckelmann himself admitted that the Etruscans had controlled the peninsula, but he considered them to be of Greek origin and, above all, he believed them to be entirely indebted to Greek civilisation. The conclusion is simple: the very fortunes of his work - which, among other things, demonstrated that the Etruscan vases scattered around the peninsula were not such - condemned Etruscan art to a subordinate position. As a result, Etruscan art failed to make the leap into the antiquarian world of the 18th century.

The anti-Romanism that accompanied the rediscovery of the Etruscans, however, deserves a different approach. In fact, the theme was present in the European culture of the modern age and this is shown by the fortunes in France of Celticism. In fact, the myth of a Gallic liberty destroyed by the Romans had great appeal as a response to the absolutism of Louis XIV and justified the will to resist of the privileged classes towards the centralising monarchy throughout the 18th century. Not only that: in the aftermath of 1789, the fortunes of Celticism made it possible to propose to the Constituent Assembly that France should go back to calling itself Gaul, and the theme maintained visibility throughout the revolutionary years, when it seemed to legitimise the provinces' resistance to revolutionary rule.

It is therefore not surprising that anti-Romanism - and in particular the reference to the Etruscans - persisted also in Italy, which from 1796 experienced the invasion of Bonaparte's French troops. Interest in the Etruscans and their ancient Mediterranean civilisation could in fact appear, from a cultural point of view, as an antidote to the political-administrative intrusiveness of revolutionary France. In the Napoleonic years we thus witness a return of interest in the Etruscans, which, however, developed along very different coordinates: on the one hand, according to a localist reading, the Etruscans became the predecessors of the modern Tuscans and were evoked to protect the distinctiveness of the region in the aftermath of the union to the French Empire in 1808,. On the other hand, the imperial dimension of the Etruscans is emphasised, again to defend the peninsula from Napoleonic power, but with the intention of supporting the idea of the political existence of an Italian nation. In the first case, the reference

figure is Giuseppe Micali, a Leghorn scholar very suspicious of the French revolution, who in 1810 published a work *L'Italia avanti il dominio de' romani (Italy before Roman rule)*, which gained much acclaim in 19th century Italy. His thesis was simple: Italy was an anthropologically plural reality, inhabited by peoples who were all very different from each other, but who had in common a cultural model, which could be traced back to that of the Etruscans. In his opinion, the Italic peoples did not include the Celts, a crude and destructive people, nor the peoples of the southern coasts, who had been contaminated by the Greek element. That left the Etruscans, whose civilisation had conquered all the other peoples of the peninsula, including the Romans. Micali, however, was against the latest findings of the Etruscans: in his opinion, Guarnacci was wrong when he wrote that the Etruscans were of Phoenician origin, incorrect when he made them colonisers of Greece, and mistaken when he asserted that the Etruscans had transmitted their alphabet to the Greeks.

Quite simply, for Micali, the Etruscans were an indigenous population that had settled in central Italy and their dominance on the peninsula had only been cultural. Needless to say, Micali's proposal was a localist one: in the face of the political union to France, he claimed the original cultural identity of Tuscany. A claim which had a long-standing primacy on the peninsula. His anti-Romanism is coherent: just as the Romans had wiped out the Etruscans, appropriating their culture without admitting predatory action, so the French could do the same to the homeland of the Renaissance and cultural modernity. The Italian discourse was completely absent from Micali's cultural orbit, which nevertheless grasped the problem: the Empire of the French was not just a military and administrative power, but a civilising model, which in turn sought in antiquity the legitimacy for dominance in Europe.

It is no coincidence that at the very moment of the birth of the French Empire in 1804, Napoleon agreed that a number of scholars from different political backgrounds (some had been ardently revolutionary, others had remained legitimists) should found *the Academie celtique*. The promoters' intentions were explicit: they wanted to prove following 18th-century French antiquarianism, that the Celts were the true founders of

civilisation and thus wanted to give cultural legitimacy to Napoleonic France's claim to dominate Europe. The harshest criticism of this train of thought came from Italy: in Milan, Vincenzo Cuoco, an exile from the Neapolitan republic of 1799, used his pen in to challenge the work of the *Académie celtique* 1805. He wrote to its proponents that 'there will hardly be a place for your Celts or any other people more ancient than the Etruscans, despite your fancy’.

Shortly thereafter, namely in 1806, Cuoco published the third and final volume of his *Plato in Italy*, a philosophical novel in which he imagined that the Greek thinker had travelled the peninsula in search of philosophical wisdom. In this reconstruction, he punctually quoted and took up Mario Guarnacci's basic thesis: the Etruscans had inhabited the entire peninsula and had scattered throughout the Mediterranean, and had given civilisation to the Greek. So that, that when the latter had arrived in southern Italy, they had not colonised the land, but only rejoined their brothers from long ago. Cuoco and Micali read Guarnacci's work in opposite terms. Micali condemned Guarnacci's fantasies and considered them completely useless to his localist theses, whilst Cuoco made them his own, because Guarnacci's pages allowed him to imagine an Italian nation that at the time existed only in the minds of a very few. In short, Guarnacci's Etruscans allowed Cuoco with a *contrivance* to solve the ethnic problem of the Italians: he presented them as a possible harmonious unity thanks to the (presumed) existence of an ancient Etruscan empire throughout the Mediterranean. Thus, having solved the national dilemma, Cuoco could claim a path of freedom for the peninsula, because Italy's cultural unity, in antiquity as in modernity, entitled the country to aspire to full independence.

Needless to say, Cuoco and Micali were polar opposites. Micali was an 18th-century scholar who sought to preserve the Tuscan identity from the encroachments of nationality, whether French or Italian made little difference in his regard; whereas Cuoco was a patriot from southern Italy who, during his years in Milan, had ended his ties with the Neapolitan nation in order to embrace the cause of an Italian state. His political project focussed on uniting the entire peninsula through a nationalising

project.

These two different, but parallel paths would accompany the Italian national movement until the creation in 1861 of the unitary state (and beyond). On the one hand, Micali's work had given strength to the federalist theses, which insisted on the hypothesis of an Italian unity through the free union of a plurality of small homelands. On the other hand, Cuoco's work had recalled the need for a national state that would put local peculiarities aside in the name of modernity. And of course, both their reference to the Etruscans, so different and opposed, was maintained throughout the 19th century: thus confirming how the Italian national movement was indebted to the cultural models developed in the 18th century peninsula.