

Jean MacIntosh Turfa, *Divining the Etruscan World: The Brontoscopic Calendar and Religious Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xiii + 408; Figs. 24: ISBN 978-1-107-00907-3 (Hardback, £ 65.00).

Nigidius Figulus' brontoscopic calendar, preserved in Joannes Lydus' *De Ostensis*, is, without doubt, an intriguing source for scholars of Etruscan culture. It was created around the mid-1st century BC by a "senator, statesman, grammarian, occultist, and natural historian (or encyclopedist)"¹ and we can read it thanks to a transcription made in the 6th century AD by a "*burocrate un po' pedante, dai gusti eruditi e dalle ambizioni letterarie*"². As a matter of fact, it can be considered to be the only comprehensive and easily understandable Etruscan calendar: neither the *liber linteus Zagabriensis* (2nd century BC)³ nor the Capua tile (first decades of the 5th century BC), both written in Etruscan, are still fully comprehensible. Notwithstanding this, the scholar dealing with this document must bear in mind that the last two are direct sources, while Figulus' brontoscopic calendar is a "third-hand source", to use Jean MacIntosh Turfa's (hereafter Turfa) expression. Firstly, its lengthy and complex historical journey has, surely, affected its contents, and, secondly, it is the written record of a religious practice, originally created by a culture (the Etruscan) and kept alive and transmitted through another one (the Roman).

Bearing in mind these methodological premises, Turfa's book can be read on a number of levels. Firstly, the book provides the first complete English translation of Figulus' brontoscopic calendar. The author had already published a first version of it in 2006 in a book on Etruscan religion edited by Nancy de Grummond and Erika Simon⁴. On that occasion, the translation was preceded by a brief introduction concerning Nigidius Figulus and Joannes Lydus, and no interpretation was proposed. Secondly, the volume tries to investigate the connections between the brontoscopic calendar and Etruscan society and culture. Ultimately, this can be seen as the book's main aim. In the opening pages, the author clearly states her opinion: she thinks that "some of the special features of the calendar furnish evidence for determining that it was created in the eighth to seventh centuries BC, in Etruria, but with input from someone skilled in Mesopotamian divination and in the use of Akkadian table texts or perhaps Aramaic or other translated versions of the great works of Assyrian and Babylonian religion" (p. x). This extremely high chronology is an idea which underlies the whole book.

¹ J. MacIntosh Turfa in N. de Grummond and E. Simon (eds.), *The Religion of the Etruscans* (Austin, 2006) p. 174.

² I. Domenici, in Giovanni Lido, *Sui segni celesti*, Milano 2007 (ed. I. Domenici, trans. by E. Maderna), p. 7.

³ See the recent edition: V. Belfiore, *Il Liber linteus di Zagabria. Testualità e contenuto* (Pisa–Roma 2010), and the observations in E. Benelli, "Il *Liber linteus* di Zagabria. Alcune riflessioni su una recente riedizione", in *Mediterranea* IX, 2012, pp. 235–240.

⁴ (above, n. 1), pp. 173–190.

The volume is organised into four main sections. The first part (pp. 3–69) analyses the background of the brontoscopic calendar from a range of perspectives; the second part (pp. 73–101) presents the Greek text and the English translation; the third part deals with the analysis of the different subjects (climatic, economic, social and political) mentioned in the document (pp. 105–237) and the final part discusses the possible sources of, and the successors to, the brontoscopic calendar (pp. 241–313).

I would like to begin by saying that, in this review, I will concentrate on a few specific aspects deserving in-depth analysis, at least from the point of view of a scholar of Etruscan culture. One of the most interesting aspects of the book is the attempt to form a picture of the cultural system that produced the original text. Turfa correctly highlights the importance of controlling the calendar (and consequently the organisation of time) and the constraining relevance of religion in Etruscan society, and sets this particular control at the “dawn of urbanized history in Tyrrhenian Etruria” (p. 4). This is one of the reasons the high chronology, mentioned above, was proposed for the composition of the brontoscopic calendar (p. 4). During the period indicated by the author, there was undoubtedly a great deal of contact between the Etruscan world and the Eastern Mediterranean⁵. All the data presented by Turfa are reliable, well documented and up-to-date, and the picture she draws of Etruscan society is accurate. More specifically, she is most certainly correct when she asserts that Etruscan culture had an ancient, wide-ranging and complex use of literacy for religious purposes and in connection with time organisation (pp. 22ff.): this is clearly attested, for instance, by the 5th century BC Capua tile⁶. The author thinks that some hints as to the antiquity of the brontoscopic calendar can be found in the text itself. Astrological references, for instance, are absent, but they are common in later brontoscopia (see, especially, pp. 123–124). She proposes that this should be interpreted as a direct Eastern influence, asserting that “just one such person, armed with a library of tablet texts, could have inspired some inquiring minds from one of the Etruscan proto-cities, and a great textual tradition could have begun” (p. 123).

Furthermore, the factions composed by commoners, slaves and women that, in the past, were understood to account for the multiple layers and redactions of the brontoscopic calendar⁷, in Turfa’s opinion find a counterpart in the stratified complexity of Etruscan society as early as the 8th century BC (p. 129 and pp. 204ff.). Although this

⁵ For the Orientalising Period in Etruria see G. Colonna, *La cultura orientalizzante in Etruria*, in *Principi etruschi tra Mediterraneo ed Europa* (Bologna 2000) pp. 55–66, and, for an updated picture, see A. Naso, “Gli influssi del vicino Oriente sull’Etruria nell’VII-VII sec. a.C.: un bilancio”, in V. Bellelli (ed.), *Le origini degli Etruschi, Storia Archeologia Antropologia* (Roma 2012), pp. 433–453.

⁶ For the diffusion on literacy in Archaic Etruria see T. Cornell, “The Tyranny of the evidence: a discussion of the possible uses of literacy in Etruria and Latium in the archaic age”, in J.H. Humphrey (ed.), *Literacy in the Ancient World, Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series* no. 3 (1991) 7–33. The reader might also find it useful to know that the proceedings of a conference on Etruscan literacy are currently in the process of being published (K. Lomas and R. Withehouse [eds.], *Etruscan literacy in its social context*, (London).

⁷ See, for instance, C. Ampolo, “Lotte sociali in Italia centrale. Un documento controverso: il calendario brontoscopico attribuito a Nigidio Figulo”, in *Opus*, IX–X, 1990–1991, p. 192.

complexity is undeniable, I think we must recognise that the available data — most of them unfortunately still from necropoleis — can be read and interpreted in many different ways and that they cannot be exclusively linked to the picture formed by the brontoscopic calendar. It seems to me in this respect that the author, here (and elsewhere in the book), rather forces the connection between the text and the archaeological evidence, however *bona fide*. To name one of many significant examples, I do not believe the parallelism asserted by the author between the comment for December the 29th “If it thunders, it signifies the most healthful leanness for bodies” and the votive bronzes of the kind of the Ombra della Sera (p. 182) can be accepted. Even the attempt to directly link the data contained in the brontoscopic calendar to the climatic history of Iron Age Italy also tends, at least in my opinion, in this direction. Although this can be read as an interesting theory, it ultimately seems to me to be extremely difficult to find close and reliable connections between written sources and the frustratingly poor set of data we have at our disposal. As a matter of fact, in the section of the work which discusses the thematic analysis of the brontoscopic calendar (pp. 105–237), the author is often forced to resort to data that are not chronologically or culturally coherent. For instance, Pompeian data is frequently used (see, for example, pp. 145, 150), as is the reference to the Chalcolithic Alpine “Iceman” (p. 186).

In other words, notwithstanding the accurate picture drawn, I think it remains impossible for us to demonstrate that the brontoscopic calendar was composed in its written form — or even in its oral version — between the 8th and the 7th centuries BC. The author bases this assertion on the observation that, in the Etruscan religion, “there is no perceptible alteration in character (apart from a gradual and predictable increase in cult activity by non-aristocrats) between the Iron Age and the first century BC, except for fluctuations in wealth and foreign artistic influence” (p. 26). I do not agree with this statement. The Etruscan religious system was far from static in the eight centuries mentioned above, and the “fluctuations in wealth and foreign artistic influence”, which, it is true, are one of our main sources of information, must also be read as hints at deep cultural modifications. To give the simplest and clearest example, the adoption of the anthropomorphic representation, or the use of Greek names in Etruscan pantheon alongside local ones, must be considered proof of strong modifications in the character of the Etruscan religious system itself. And I think that we should, at least for the period preceding the 4th century BC, be very careful when we refer to an “Etruscan” religious system *tout court*: our sources, especially those from the 8th and 7th centuries BC, are not sufficiently clear to prove the existence of a religious system shared by all the different areas of Etruria⁸.

In my opinion, for all of the above reasons, Carmine Ampolo’s proposal regarding the redaction of the brontoscopic calendar is, at least for the moment, still preferable, since

⁸ For a description of the lack of documents from the most ancient period and an overview of the Etruscan religion, see A. Maggiani, “11. La religione”, in G. Bartoloni (ed.), *Introduzione all’Etruscologia* (Milano 2012) pp. 395–418 and, in particular, pp. 399–405.

we cannot have any certainty about the moment of birth of the oral tradition. Ampolo links it to the Middle Republican Period and recognises in the text some aspects of the Etruscan society of the 4th to 2nd century BC (for instance, the relevance of the “alliance” between servile elements and women⁹) and remembers a crucial reference to the moment (or one of the moments) in which the *etrusca disciplina* was officially (re)organised and codified at Rome (Cic., *de div.* 1, 41, 92), probably between the end of the second Punic war and the beginning of the Gracchan reforms¹⁰.

Aside from the chronological aspect, I think that one more question should be posed, namely: which Etruscans did the original version of the brontoscopic calendar address? Massimiliano Di Fazio recently pointed out that other Etruscan calendars known to us have a local, rather than a national, validity¹¹. This is not surprising, if we consider how difficult it is to perceive Etruscan political unity. Furthermore, the questions of the *duodecim populi* and their meetings at the *Fanum Voltumnae* must be critically read and set in the correct chronological and historical context. Turfa recognises that no sanctuary or city is exclusively linked to this document, but she proposes *Tarquinius* as a likely candidate due to the connection of the *Tages* myth to this city (p. 25). In this respect, I consider the closing lines of the brontoscopic calendar meaningful: “This brontoscopic almanac Nigidius claimed was not universal, but was only for Rome” (p. 101). These few words can be considered to some extent the *summa* of the complex tradition of the text and, at the same time, they explain fairly clearly that the version we have to hand is already not an Etruscan one, but a partial Roman adaptation. The author is, of course, correct — if we limit our considerations to Southern Etruria — when she notes: “There is, however, no significant climatic or geographic difference between Rome and the major Etruscan cities” (p. 25). Figulus’ comment, however, is not obscure, as Turfa claims: the difference does not lie in the climate or in the geography, but in the cultural perspective, as correctly stated in the recent Italian edition of the *De ostensis*¹².

A rich apparatus of appendices (pp. 315–349), a timeline of personalities, cultural phases and historical periods (pp. 351–353) and a glossary (pp. 355–357) conclude the book. The appendices comprise a useful collection of texts (both in Latin or Greek and in translation) concerning Etruscan religion, a sample of the Mesopotamian documents quoted in the text and tables concerning the comparison of calendars from the “Iron Age world” (p. 328) and a collection of other brontoscopia in the classical tradition (again, both in Latin or Greek and in translation).

⁹ C. Ampolo, *op. cit.*, pp. 185–197.

¹⁰ C. Ampolo, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

¹¹ M. Di Fazio, “Tempo del sacerdote, tempo del cittadino. Sacro e memoria culturale presso gli Etruschi”, in V. Nizzo, L. La Rocca (eds.), *Antropologia e archeologia a confronto: Rappresentazioni e pratiche del sacro* (Roma 2012) pp. 147–166.

¹² Giovanni Lido, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–30 and note n. 102, pp. 149–50.

In conclusion, the book can be considered an interesting and, to some extent, intriguing attempt to link an ancient text to archaeological evidence. This must be considered both the strength and the weakness of the author's experiment.

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