

ORIGINS

Pelasgians, Oinotrians and Aborigines

Greeks and Romans were fascinated by origin stories. Many writers spend a lot of time trying to establish who the first peoples of Italy were, where they came from and when they arrived in Italy. But as soon as we start to read these accounts, we can see there is no consensus whatsoever about the early history of Italy. There are also no contemporary written records of this time, as writing did not arrive in Italy until c. 800 BCE (Chapter 5). As a result, the histories of this early period are a mixture of tradition, myth, legend and projection back from the writers' own times.

The sources in this chapter can be confusing to read, especially when trying to get to grips with them for the first time. Many of the ethnic names mentioned by poets simply connoted 'barbarian group in contact with Greek-speaking world' and could be used to describe different communities at different times. The same names are used for groups in very different places and periods, and some ancient authors try (with difficulty) to make plausible connections between all the groups that bear the same name. Historians such as Dionysius of Halikarnassos (Source 1.13) sometimes present multiple different theories and try to weigh up the likelihood of each version being correct. Nevertheless, later attempts by Greco-Roman historians and geographers to define these groups should not lead us to think they all really existed as distinct communities.

Names that recur across multiple sources are 'Aborigines' (from the Latin phrase *ab origine*, 'from the beginning'), 'Pelasgians', 'Oinotrians' and 'Tyrrhenians'. The last of these groups is the easiest to pin down, because it is usually an alternative name for the Etruscans. But there are some mentions of the Tyrrhenians when it is unclear that 'Etruscans' are meant specifically – for example, the 'Tyrrhenian' pirates in the Homeric hymn to Dionysus may just be 'barbarian' pirates (Source 2.16).

‘Aborigines’, as the name suggests, is normally the name given to the autochthonous people of Italy. But even this is sometimes questioned – as we will see, some sources claim that they are actually *aberrigines* or ‘wanderers’ (Source 1.4). ‘Pelasgian’ and ‘Oinotrian’ are sometimes presented as different names for the same group, or names for two parts of the same group. Some accounts say that the Pelasgians migrated to Italy from Greece after the Trojan War; for example, in Homer, ‘Pelasgians’ are associated with Greece, usually Thessaly or Crete (Source 1.1). Other writers suggest that the Pelasgians may be autochthonous – that is, they may be native to Italy. Still others (such as Sophocles) connect the Pelasgians to the Etruscans. In general, ‘Pelasgians’ appears to be a term that was used very broadly for various Italian peoples (Wallace-Hadrill 2011, 415–416).

‘Oinotrian’ is a name associated with the south of Italy (Roller 2017, 33), and often connected to a migration from Greece. Pausanias, for example, calls the Oinotrians the first migration from Greece to Italy, and explicitly names Oinotros as the first founder of an *apoikia* (the Greek name for a settlement abroad) (Source 1.5). The name ‘Oinotrian’ has sometimes been assigned to an early Italic language, or a group of closely related languages, in the south of Italy before the expansion of the Samnites and their Oscan language into the region. One of the longest and most keenly debated of these ‘Pre-Samnite’ texts is the Tortora Cippus (Source 1.6), which appears to be an early legal text (c. 600 BCE).

Other ethnic groups which are sometimes named by ancient authors include the Sikels (also associated with Sicily), the Opikoi, Oskoi or Osci (associated with Campania, and often confused or conflated with the Oscan-speakers who lived in that area later), the Ausones or Aurunci (associated with the central and southern parts of Italy). These names are used interchangeably by some authors.

Ultimately, we cannot untangle the ‘real’ communities behind these names. The names represent only a Greco-Roman attempt, many centuries later, to make sense of the distant past. These stories do tell us a lot, however, about Greek and Roman attitudes to migration and autochthony, and their understanding of the relationships between languages and peoples in their own time. They also show how Greco-Roman writers sought to get to grips with their own distant past through storytelling about themselves and their neighbours (Crielaard 2009, 39).

1.1 Pelasgians

This is one of the earliest mentions of the Pelasgians; here they live in Larisa, in Thrace (part of mainland Greece). Homer also mentions them living in Crete in the Odyssey (19.177).

Homer, *Iliad* 2.840–844

Probably first recorded eighth–sixth century BCE.

Language: Greek.

And Hippothoos led the Pelasgian peoples who fought with spears
and dwelt in loamy Larisa:

Hippothoos and Pylaios, descendant of Ares, led them,
the two sons of Pelasgian Lethos, son of Teutamios.

1.2 Tyrrhenian Pelasgians

Here the Pelasgians are connected to, or perhaps equated with, the Tyrrhenians (Etruscans).

Sophocles, *Inakhos* fragment 270

Lived c. 497/6–406/5 BCE.

Language: Greek.

Flowing Inakhos, child of Ocean,
father of springs, taking precedence
in the lands of Argos and in Hera's rocky hills
and among the Tyrrhenian Pelasgians.

1.3 The languages of the Pelasgians and Tyrsenians

In this passage, Herodotus uses his knowledge of the languages spoken in his own time to try to understand the relationships between different groups in the past. He seems to place both the Pelasgians and Tyrrhenians in Thrace. Note that in Herodotus's dialect of Greek, 'Tyrrhenian' is written as 'Tyrsenian'.

Herodotus, *Histories* 1.57–58

Lived c. 484–425 BCE.

Language: Greek.

[57.1] I cannot say for certain what language the Pelasgians spoke. But if it is possible to make a judgement from the Pelasgians who live above the Tyrsenians in the city of Kreston, who at one time shared a border with those now called Dorians and lived in the land now called Thessaly, [57.2] and the Pelasgians who lived in Plakia and Skylake on the Hellespont, who became fellow-inhabitants of the Athenians, and by the many other settlements that were Pelasgian but have now changed their names – if it is possible to judge from all of these, then the Pelasgians spoke a non-Greek language.

[57.3] If, then, all of the Pelasgians spoke in this way, then the Attic people, being Pelasgian, learned the Greek language at the same time as they became Greeks. For the people of Kreston and the people of Plakia speak the same language as each other, but do not speak the same language as their neighbours, and it is clear that they brought this way of speaking with them when they arrived in the area, and that they have preserved it.

[58] But the Greeks – I think this is clear – have always consistently used the same language. They split from the Pelasgians and initially had a tiny population. But from these small beginnings they set off and grew into a huge number of peoples, and most of the Pelasgians and many other barbarian peoples have joined them.

1.4 Aborigines

In this passage, Dionysius discusses the Aborigines. He ties the history of the Aborigines into Roman accounts which claimed that Rome had been founded by the Trojan Aeneas, who came to Italy after the Trojan War. For the term 'apoikia', see Chapter 3.

Dionysius of Halikarnassos, *Roman Antiquities* 1.10–11

Lived c. 60–7 BCE.

Language: Greek.

[10.1] Some say that the Aborigines, from whom the Romans sprang, were autochthonous Italians, who appeared from nowhere. (When I say 'Italy', I mean the whole peninsula, bounded by the Ionian Gulf, the Tyrrhenian Sea and, by land, the Alps.) And they say that this name was originally given to them because they were the first ancestors of those who came after them, so we might call them the 'Founding Fathers' or the 'First Generation'. [10.2] But others say that a few homeless people and wanderers came together from many areas, stumbled on each other in that spot and made a defensible home there, and made their living by piracy and pasturage. And the people who say this also alter their name to fit their situation, and call them 'Aberrigines', [from the Latin *aberro* 'to roam'], to show that they were wanderers. In fact, according to this explanation, it may be that the Aborigines were exactly the same as the ancient people called the Leleges, for this name has been given to peoples who were homeless and jumbled up and had no particular land that they were able to call their own. [10.3] And others tell a story that the Aborigines were settlers sent out by the Ligurians, whose land borders that of the Umbrians. For the Ligurians live in much of Italy, and also graze some of Gaul. No one knows which of these two areas is their original homeland, because nothing else is said about them.

[11.1] The most learned of the Roman writers – including Porcius Cato, who diligently put together the genealogies of the cities of Italy, and Gaius Sempronius and many others – say that the Aborigines were Greeks who once lived in Akhaia, and that they emigrated many generations prior to the Trojan War. However, they do not define either the Greek clan that they were part of, or the city from which they emigrated, or the date or leader of the apoikia, or what kind of misfortune meant they had to leave their mother city.

1.5 Oinotros travels to Italy

In this passage, Pausanias claims that Oinotros was the very first Greek to settle Italy (see Chapter 3 for more information on Greek apoikiai).

Pausanias, Description of Greece, 8.3.5–7

Lived c. 110–c. 180 CE.

Language: Greek.

[3.5] Oinotros, the youngest son of Lykaon, asked his brother Nyktimos for funds and men and then made the crossing to Italy by ship. Oinotria gets its name from this king Oinotros. This was the first expedition sent out from Greece to an apoikia; if we are exact in calculating the dates, we can see that no foreigners migrated to an alien land before Oinotros either.

1.6 Tortora Stele

This early text is very fragmentary and is not well understood. It was discovered in 1991, re-used in the wall of a modern building next to an archaic necropolis. It appears to be written in an Italic language related to Oscan; this language has sometimes been called ‘Pre-Samnite’ or ‘Oinotrian’ (Lazarini and Poccetti 2001; Crawford 2011, 1336–1339). There is enough left of the text to see that it includes imperatives ending in ‘-tōd’ and clauses starting with ‘ne pis’, meaning ‘not anyone’, which were used in Latin and Oscan legal texts. In this text, some of these imperatives seem to be preceded by a negative – so, the text is prohibiting particular actions, suggesting that the text may be part of an early law code. If this is correct, it would be one of the earliest surviving written laws from Italy. We do not know the name of the community which produced the text, but some scholars give them the name ‘Oinotrians’.

ImIt Blanda 1, Tortora, c. 500 BCE.

Stone stele, 0.67 high. Now in Museo Nazionale Reggio Calabria.

Language: ‘Pre-Samnite’, alphabet: Akhaian Greek (adapted).

Side A

- 1 [---] for (?) of Jupiter [---]
[---] made UKUR from
the best of what was received (?) [---]
it (should) not for anyone AUNOU [---]
- 5 by (?) and OSERWIA.

Side B

- 1 The (?) should (have a council?) (at?) *Akhirnenia* (?)
for (?) whoever were the best men,
they should have use but within the boundary [---]

Side C

- 1 The public (things?) (should) not of anyone (?)
(if?) (?) they were good.
No one should take nor [---]
[---] *Akhirnenia*.

Top

- 1 [---]NIA feet (?)
LAMLUOUW[---]

1.7 Prophecy and the Pelasgians

Here, Dionysius describes how a prophecy could act as the catalyst for a migration. We will see more examples concerning Greek settlements in Chapter 3. Dionysius tries to explain the place name Velia (pronounced 'Welia') to his audience by talking about how the Greek language has changed over time. There was a /wl/ sound in early Greek, written with the letter <F> (called 'digamma'), which had already been lost from many dialects by the Classical period. Dionysius refers to 'the syllable OU', because in his time the Latin letter <V>, which also represented a /wl/, was usually transcribed into Greek as <OU>, which was otherwise used to write a vowel sound.

Dionysius of Halikarnassos, *Roman Antiquities* 1.19–20

Lived c. 60–c. 7 BCE.

Language: Greek.

[19.1] The Pelasgians who turned to the middle of the peninsula and crossed the mountains of Italy arrived in the land of the Umbrians, who bordered the Aborigines. The Umbrians, who were a very great and ancient people, also inhabited much of the rest of the land in Italy. So, initially, the Pelasgians ruled over the lands where they had first ended up and took possession of a few small Umbrian towns. But after a large army attacked them, they

became frightened because their enemies were so great in number, and they turned and went into the land of the Aborigines. [19.2] The Aborigines decided to treat them as hostile, and quickly came together from the nearest lands to drive them out. Luckily, at the time, the Pelasgians happened to be camping near Cutilia, an Aboriginal city close to the sacred lake, and they learned of a little island whirling around in the water and heard the name of its inhabitants from their captured prisoners. And they decided that their prophecy had been fulfilled. [19.3] For the oracle, which had been given to them in Dodona and which Lucius Mallius (a well-known man) says that he saw himself inscribed in archaic letters on a particular tripod in the sacred precinct of Zeus, said the following:

‘Go and look for the Saturnian land of the Sikels,
And Kotyle of the Aborigines, where an island floats:
Mix with these people and send a tithe to Phoibos Apollo
And send heads to the son of Kronos and send a man to the Father.’

[20.1] When the Aborigines arrived with a large army, the Pelasgians held out olive branches and went to meet them unarmed. They told them about their misfortunes and asked to be accepted in friendship, as fellow inhabitants rather than troublemakers, since a divine power had driven them into this particular land – and they told their story in full.

[20.2] After the Aborigines had heard this, they decided to obey the oracle and take on this Greek alliance, in aid of their wars against the barbarians, since they were engaged in a conflict with the Sikels. And so they made a treaty with the Pelasgians and gave them some of their lands near the sacred lake, most of which was marshland. This is still called Velia [= Elea], in accordance with their language at the time. [20.3] For it was the custom for archaic Greeks to place before many of the words which now begin with vowels the syllable OU [i.e. the sound /w/], written with one letter. This letter was a digamma [= F, the Greek letter for the sound /w/], shaped like a double gamma [= Γ, the Greek letter for the sound /g/] joined with one upright line, as in WELÉNĒ [instead of *helenē* = torch], WANAX [instead of *anax* = king], WOIKOS [instead of *oikos* = house], WĒAR [instead of *ēar* = spring] and many other such words.

1.8 Treaty with the Serdaioi

We know that Greco-Roman literary sources do not tell the whole story about the early peoples of Italy, because there are names of communities in the epigraphic record which never appear in literature. One famous example is the treaty between the Serdaioi and the people of Sybaris (Figure 1.1). We have no other traces of the Serdaioi, apart from a few coins with the legend SER

(Horsnaes 2002, 121). This name does not appear in later records; we can only assume that they lived in southern Italy somewhere. But at the time of the earliest Greek settlements, they were clearly a flourishing community with enough importance for the people of Sybaris to want to create a treaty with them and install a copy at Olympia as a permanent record of their friendship (Meiggs and Lewis 1969, 18–19).

SEG 22-336, Olympia, c. 550–525 BCE.

Treaty on a bronze tablet. 0.089 high (max) x 0.157 (max) x 0.005 deep. Now in Olympia Museum, inv. B 4750.

Language: Greek.

- 1 ἀρμόχθεν οἱ Κυβαρῖ-
ται κοὶ σύμμαχοι κοὶ
Σερδαῖοι ἐπὶ φιλότατ-
ι πιστᾷ καὶ δόλῳ ἀε-
5 ἴδιον· πρόξενοι ὁ Ζε-
ὺς κοὶ πόλιν κοῖλλοι θ-
εοὶ καὶ πόλις Ποσειδα-
νία.

The Sybarites and their allies and the Serdaioi agreed a faithful and honest friendship forever. Witnesses: Zeus and Apollo and the other gods and the city of Poseidonia.

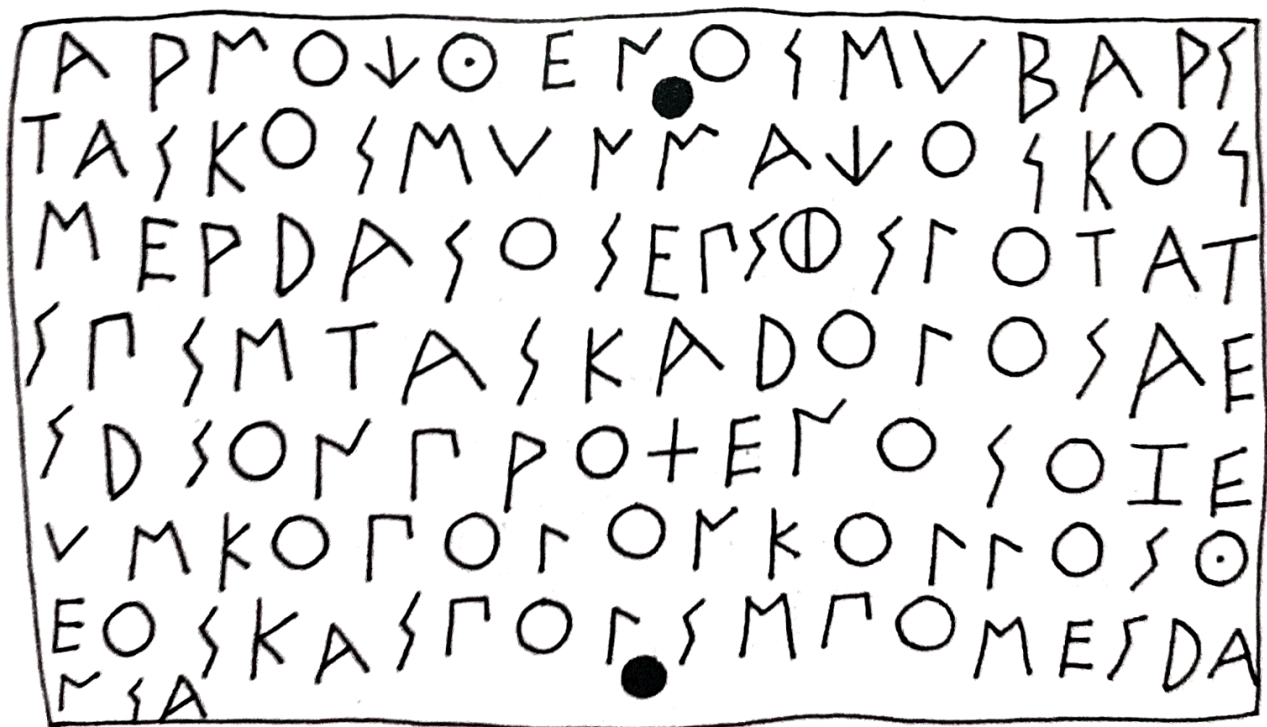


Figure 1.1 Treaty on bronze between the Sybarites and the Serdaioi. Image: K. McDonald.