

The New York Review of Books

A Scandal in Etruria

FEBRUARY 24, 2005

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The Scarith of Scornello: A Tale of Renaissance Forgery

by Ingrid D. Rowland

University of Chicago Press, 230 pp., \$22.50

1.

Ingrid Rowland's remarkable book about an Etruscan forgery in the age of Galileo begins at Scornello, a hilltop near Volterra, the most isolated of all the cities of Tuscany, lying in the middle of a triangle running from Florence to Siena and the Tyrrhenian Sea. Though a real place, Scornello is not to be found even on large-scale maps. But between 1634 and 1636 a nineteen-year-old Tuscan nobleman, Curzio Inghirami, scion of an old Volterran family, made it famous among the learned all over Europe.

One autumn day in 1634, Curzio was playing by a stream near his family villa in Scornello when he stumbled across a strange hard object half buried on the bank. Covered with hair and pitch, it turned out to be a kind of waterproof box that contained mysterious writings on paper, fragmentary but still legible after a long time underground. It was not hard to recognize the script as Etruscan, which was known from inscriptions collected by Renaissance scholars but was of course still undeciphered. The box itself was an object Curzio called a scarith, a completely unfamiliar but Etruscan-sounding word. But as more scarith (the word is both singular and plural) emerged from the ground and were opened, more texts were found, in both Etruscan and Latin. Eventually ninety-four scarith were discovered in a year of excavations. Better than a Rosetta stone, these papers seemed to be a whole archive of Etruscan history and prophecy, translated into a readable language. Young Curzio imagined himself riding to international fame on a sensational discovery.

There were of course obstacles. When the news of the scarith spread, the police of the grand duke of Tuscany were called in, but an investigation found the discoveries legitimate. Then Curzio had to disseminate his finds, something expensive and difficult in a province where publishing was in serious decline. But a printer who was just setting up shop in Florence took the book on, and there were probably hidden subsidies from the grand duke, Ferdinando II, who was sensitive to the prestige such discoveries might bring to his beleaguered state. These were, after all, rather dreary times in Tuscany. The last major Florentine book, Galileo's

Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems, had been published in 1632, but its author was tried by the Roman Inquisition the following year and the book condemned.

Etruscology was safer. And it could teach useful political lessons. The factious duchy of Tuscany was made up of formerly independent cities which were always ready to break from the center. It was salutary to remind them of the Etruscan League, in which twelve cities banded together to confront a common danger, the advance of imperial Rome.

In the two years between the discovery of the first scarith and publication in Florence Curzio Inghirami was roughly the age of a modern undergraduate writing a senior thesis. Yet his *Ethruscarum Antiquitatum Fragmenta* of 1636 runs to over three hundred double-column folio pages in Latin. It claims to show the “origins, customs and deeds of Rome and other peoples,” all emerging from excavations around his family’s villa. A large fold-out map shows us the landscape in which the boy grew up and the scarith were found; and another recreates Etruscan Volterra in its days of glory, complete with amphitheaters and a naumachia, a view not uninfluenced by Pirro Ligorio’s famous map of ancient Rome, published eighty years earlier.

Another fold-out etching shows the Inghirami family tree, from tenth-century Saxon ancestors through innumerable warriors, nobles, and prelates up to the latest bud, Curzio himself. These and many other plates were used to ornament a Latin translation of nothing less than the sacred archives of the College of Augurs of Etruscan Volterra. For the first time since antiquity, learned Europe could read the mysterious lore and ominous prophecies of the Etruscans, which went on not just for a few lines but for hundreds of pages.

Of course, it was all a forgery. Curzio dreamed up a fantasy world of Etruscans and Romans fighting it out on the grounds of his family farm. He invented an imaginary multilingual hero, Prospero of Fiesole, an Etruscan equivalent of the California Indian Ishi, who hands on tribal lore as his race stands on the brink of extinction. Prospero is supposed to be learned in languages and an expert in the famous Etruscan science of augury. He utters prophecies and preserves those of earlier augurs. Sometimes Prospero is exceedingly clever, even for an Etruscan, as when he predicts that a King of the Jews will soon come forth, from whose birth the years will be numbered. But Inghirami’s forgery, as Rowland makes clear, is mostly mumbo-jumbo in classical wrapping, meant to befuddle and to tease:

The Wolf is the mother of the Lamb. The Lamb shall love the Dog. A pig shall come forth from the horde of Pigs and shall devour the work of the Dog.

He shall laugh while weeping, and build while destroying, until water swallows all of Etruria. Then shall the Kingdom of Volterra [be] again. This prophecy will not always be obscure.

Prospero's priestly colleagues allowed him, we are told, to take their archives to the citadel of Scornello as hostile armies approached Volterra. It is the year 64 BC (2,796 years after the founding of Volterra) and, in Curzio's story, the Romans are on the trail of the traitor Catiline, who took refuge in Etruria and thus exposed all Etruscans to Roman vengeance. The Romans are closing in, and Prospero knows that he will perish in the next onslaught. But he has time to bury the precious papers in ninety-four handy scarith. He foresees that one day a precocious young lover of antiquity, whose father will own the property, will discover the time capsules and recover the history of the Etruscan people. Prospero addresses his future interpreter with moving words, but also warns off intruders for whom the trove was not predestined:

Beware, beware, beware. Prospero of Fiesole, resident of this colony, Guardian of the Citadel, Prophesied the year after Catilina's death. You have discovered the treasure. Mark the spot, and go away.

A student's erudite joke perhaps lay at the origins of the forgery, but Curzio grew obsessed with his own creation and blew it up to a kind of Etruscan *Lord of the Rings*. For the international public, who could not examine the scarith in person, he provided pictures. With remarkable inventiveness he illustrated about thirty pages of pseudo-Etruscan text and about as many Latin "translations," scratched in pseudo-archaic letters. But this core of illustrated "proof" is expanded to hundreds of columns of printed text, a complete Etruscan library in Latin translation.

Out of the scarith came the annals of the Etruscan race from the time of Noah, who supposedly left the ark and wandered until he came to the Tiber valley, where he changed his name to Janus, founded the Janiculum, and fathered the Etruscans, whose language was thought to be descended from Hebrew. Scarith after scarith produced prophecies, chronicles, and the history of Volterra from its founding (by none other than Noah/Janus, 4,495 years before the publication of Curzio's book). They provided the constitutions of the Etruscan League and even the sigla of a hundred cities who sent ambassadors to its meetings.

Aside from the adolescent flavor of his Latin, Curzio made two fundamental mistakes. First, the Etruscan inscriptions illustrated in the book ran from left to right, whereas even before decipherment it was realized that Etruscan ran from right to left. And second, the writings were all on paper. Scholars knew that the Romans wrote on papyrus (*charta* in Latin) and the Etruscans on linen. Curzio could argue that paper was linen in the sense that it was made from linen rags, but in the end this proved a feeble defense. Luckily for him it was not until many years after the affair died down that it was noticed that the paper in the scarith bore the watermark of the local paper factory at Colle di Val d'Elsa.

What is surprising is how well the forgery held up, at least in Tuscany. The Inghirami were a

noble family and the grand duke seems to have subsidized the book, facts that silenced skeptics within the duchy. The Etruscan language was considered somehow the ancestor of the Tuscan dialect, and thus any Etruscan discovery bolstered the prestige of the duchy. Ingrid Rowland, who knows Etruscan, Latin, and Tuscan, is at her most scintillating when she discusses the importance of language in Tuscan society. In Florence, Siena, Volterra, and the smallest towns gentlemen sharpened their wits in word games and theatrical productions sponsored by academies with self-mocking names that appealed to the socially assured: the Thunderstruck, the Rude, the Whimsical, the Loafers, the Lackadaisical, the Interred, the Revived, the Desirous, the Edited, the Kindled. In Florence the Chaff (the famous Accademia della Crusca) worked on the great dictionary of Tuscan, taking a grain sieve as their symbol as they sifted good usage from the creeping barbarisms imported from Venice, Lombardy, or France.

As Rowland shows, even spelling counted. In Florence the official spelling of Etruria was Hetruria; the grand duke was Magnus Dux Hetruriae. The H drifted into the spelling of Curzio's book, *Ethruscarum Antiquitatum Fragmenta*. If you added the H, it was a sign that you believed in the superiority of the Ethruscans over the Greeks and Romans, the continuity of the Hebrew prophetic tradition with Ethruscan augury, the unifying force of the Ethruscan language in forging the Hetruscan League, and the survival of that same language, with some plebeian Latin thrown in, as the origin of the noble language of Tuscany. On the other hand if you corrected the spelling to Etruscan, it meant you were an outsider, a skeptic, and a doubter of the ancient wisdom that came out of the hillside of Scornello between 1634 and 1636.

Renaissance scholarship had become sophisticated in sniffing out forgeries. It had demolished the Donation of Constantine, a document that alleged to be the deed of gift of the western Roman Empire to the pope by Constantine as he left for Constantinople. It had devastated the Annals of Annius of Viterbo, a prolific Dominican forger of the late fifteenth century who had been the first to chronicle the prehistory of the Etruscans. Annius had forged Etruscan inscriptions, buried them, and then translated them on discovery, and so was a spiritual ancestor of Curzio. Rowland shows convincingly that Curzio read Annius and adapted his forgeries to his own purposes. This was asking for trouble, and soon the critics began their attack.

2.

Rowland's account of the critics has the verve of a good detective story. There were false scents at first. One commentator thought that Curzio was too young to have made all this up and that in any case the scarith looked as if they had been buried for many years. The finger was then pointed at one of his distinguished ancestors. Tommaso "Fedra" Inghirami, who lived a century before Curzio, gained fame as a teenage actor when, while playing the role of Phaedra in a Senecan tragedy, he managed to improvise Latin verse as the stage sets collapsed

around him. Twenty-five years later Raphael painted his portrait, showing an obese and wall-eyed man, but revealing a personality as scintillating and entertaining as ever. But the idea of “Fedra” as the culprit gained no traction, and the most perceptive critics began to circle like sharks around young Curzio.

The skeptics tended to live in Rome and to gather around Cardinal Francesco Barberini and his magnificent library. The fiercest critic of all was Leone Allacci, a native of Chios who had migrated to Rome and had every reason to exalt Latin and Greek over Etruscan. He attacked the Latin style of Prospero, “this fogmaker from Fiesole,” as barbarous and vulgar, and evidently the work of an adolescent. Curzio was by now under the lens. Allacci attacked the scarith texts in two hundred scathing pages, published in 1640. Henceforth they were dead beyond resuscitation as far as scientific philology was concerned.

But surprisingly the texts were defended, and then counterattacked, until all of learned Europe was talking about the scarith of Scornello. Curzio brought out a second book in 1645, when he was thirty-one, in which he devoted a thousand pages to their defense. By this time a total of 209 scarith had been unearthed, but even with this flood of new information Curzio still failed to win over the great scholars of his day. By 1650 the texts had disappeared from learned discourse. Curzio, however, went on to write a lengthy history of Volterra. He lived until 1655, and when he died at age forty-one he was considered a leading light of Volterran scholarship. His forgery of the documentary sources of his history of Volterra was not demonstrated until 1924.

Why should any of this matter? Rowland thinks the key is the Galileo affair. In 1633 Tuscany had to surrender its most distinguished scientist to the Roman Inquisition and suppress his great book. Grand Duke Ferdinando II was powerless to prevent the unfolding of the tragedy. Urban VIII was the pope who let slip the hounds of the Inquisition on the great scientist. Some of the fiercest critics of the scarith texts came from the learned circles around this pope and his nephew, Cardinal Francesco Barberini. It was as though in the eyes of Rome no Tuscan cultural production, either astronomical or Etruscological, was to be allowed to flourish.

Perhaps this explains some of the opposition to the scarith texts. But the critics were out for blood because a fraud was a fraud. To read the *Ethruscarum Antiquitatum Fragmenta* today is to enter an overheated world of adolescent fantasy, which seems far from the *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*. There is some astronomical lore in Curzio’s text and a follower of Galileo wrote a book trying to make sense of it, the way a modern astronomer might try to check the date of an eclipse mentioned in ancient China. But there was no astronomical sense to be made, because science had no place in the education of a literary gentleman like Curzio Inghirami.

But Etruscology did count enormously in bolstering Medici prestige. In the year following the publication of the scarith texts Florence advertised its Etruscan heritage, in the middle of papal Rome, on one of the most lavish of all baroque façades. This is Palazzo Medici, now called Palazzo Madama, which houses the Senate of modern Italy. The façade is seen by everyone hurrying from Piazza Navona to see the Caravaggios in San Luigi dei Francesi, but few stop to admire it, and it has never been interpreted properly. But in its own way it is a symbolic text about Etruscan origins.

Between 1637 and 1641 Cardinal Carlo de' Medici, uncle of the grand duke, rebuilt the old Roman Medici palace in a grand style. More than a century earlier Leo X, the first Medici pope, lived there while he was still a cardinal. The lion was his symbol and the symbol of Florence. So the new façade shows a hundred lions, sculpted in stone or stucco, clawing their way out of window frames or strutting across the frieze. The skin of the Nemean lion, which Hercules used as an all-weather cloak, is nailed above the main door. But the most conspicuous decorations on the façade are the window frames of the main “noble” floor. They alternate between showing Hercules and Omphale, the Lydian queen who bought Hercules as a slave lover for a year and had him do her bidding. She made him exchange clothes with her and pursue feminine diversions, like sewing and singing with the tambourine. Their cross-dressed dalliance became a favorite theme of baroque art.

But why put Hercules and Omphale on a cardinal's palace? This is hardly what the political theorists of the time would have called an *exemplum virtutis*. The stories told about the pair were indecorous and ribald, wholly at odds with the public morality expected of a Roman cardinal. But out of this union came the founder of the Etruscan race. Omphale, says Pausanias, bore Hercules a son called Tyrrhenus, the hero who in the mythic past led the Etruscans out of Lydia to settle in Italy, by the shores of the “Tyrrhenian” Sea. So we are seeing the parents of the Etruscans, so to speak, on the façade of the Medici palace. This is in full view of Piazza Navona, where, a few years later, Bernini's Four Rivers Fountain would use an obelisk to trumpet the fame of the Pamphili, a provincial family newly raised by the roulette of the Vatican conclave to the summit of Roman society. In this Etruscan–Egyptian dialogue across urban space we can read the rivalries of successive papal dynasties.

3.

A good forgery is fascinating to anyone who is not tricked by it. The *annus mirabilis* of forgery studies was 1990, when there was a major exhibition of fakes in art at the British Museum and Anthony Grafton published a perceptive short book on textual forgeries.¹ Grafton reminds us that the art of the forger and that of the critic proceed *pari passu*, like the inventors of computer viruses and the writers of anti-virus programs. Each sharpens the wit of the other as the level of skill is ratcheted up on both sides. And he reminds us that both forgery and the skills to detect it were highly developed in the ancient world. Forgery in the

Renaissance was in a sense the revival of an aspect of the classical past, and to unmask it critics looked to tools that originated in antiquity.

Museums count on the willingness of the public to flock in to see the best fakes. This was recently the case with an exhibition in Siena on Icilio Federico Joni, the most successful of all the early-twentieth-century forgers of Italian primitive art.² Bernard Berenson bought four Jonis before he got a whiff of forgery, and there is still a delicate Joni Madonna hanging on the staircase of his house in Florence, *I Tatti*, to attract the admiration of the unwary.

Berenson considered people like Joni social parasites. But often scholars who work on forgery stress the creative side and let admiration creep into their work. At his best Joni was capable of skillful work, and few art historians would be able to dismiss all the paintings in the Siena exhibition were they not told that they were fakes. In addition, the catalog reminds us that considerable stretches of the townscape of “medieval” Siena are, if not exactly forgeries, at any rate productions of the historicizing imagination of the late nineteenth century.³ The architects who built these battlemented neo-Gothic piles are in a way the Jonis of urban form, though their motives were nobler. They were romantics who imagined an ideal Middle Ages as the setting of all that was good in Sienese society, the cradle in which an enlightened citizenry could absorb a Sienese Trecento ideal, Good Government, undistracted by the decline of succeeding centuries.

Forgers are more sternly scolded, however, in the great corpus of Raphael documents published posthumously last year by the Harvard historian John Shearman, who isolated sixty-eight forged letters, biographies, financial instruments, and even sonnets that have plagued Raphael’s biographers. Some have been around since the seventeenth century but most were produced for the overheated market for works by Raphael of the 1860s and 1870s. Like all forgeries they betray their period, which was one of fascination with the characters and personalities of great artists. But they pollute the record, and even though Shearman explains the circumstances in which they were produced he concludes with a sobering reflection on “what it is psychologically hardest for the historian to do: to renounce information, and especially to renounce glimpses of the human being.”⁴

Gloating as they sharpened their knives in the Vatican and Barberini libraries, skeptics proved within a few years of their discovery that the scarith texts were not a time capsule from the Etruscan past. Eventually even Tuscan historians had to admit they were not letters in bottles tossed by their ancestors into the river of time. But Curzio Inghirami never gave in and held his own with quick wit and a ready repartee, not to mention an unceasing flow of freshly excavated scarith. One can see why Ingrid Rowland admires this erudite young forger rather more than his demolishers.

1. 1

Fake? The Art of Deception, edited by Mark Jones with Paul Craddock and Nicholas Barker (University of California Press, 1990); and Anthony Grafton, *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton University Press, 1990). ↵

2. 2

Falsi d'autore: Icilio Federico Joni e la cultura del falso tra Otto e Novecento, edited by Gianni Mazzoni (Siena: Protagon, 2004). ↵

3. 3

David Rossi, "L'invenzione dello spazio medievale," in *Falsi d'autore*, pp. 37–46. ↵

4. 4

John Shearman, *Raphael in Early Modern Sources (1483–1602)*, 2 volumes (Yale University Press, 2003), Vol. 1, p. 35. ↵