

POLYTHEISTIC RELIGIONS IN PRE-ROMAN ITALY

Celsus, *Alethès Logos*, V, 25

“Every population cultivates its own traditions, anyway they have been established. And this seems to happen not only because every population believed that was right to follow its own customs and necessary to preserve the principles in force, but also because, as it’s verisimilar, all parts of earth, assigned some to a tutelary deity and some to another from the beginning and divided into fixed domains, are still administered in this way. Besides, what is done by every population is right in so far as it is done in the way those tutelary deities like it. It will be impious to subvert the original institution of the various places”

So Celsus says in his work reconstructed from its criticism written by Origen; the basic concept is that every population has the right-duty to preserve its costumes, beliefs and deities of the land it belongs. Although Celsus is a late and not very reliable source, since his work comes to us indirectly, the idea he expresses here should be widely spread in Graeco-Roman world. Just think that Greeks described other religions in geographical works or geographical parts of historical works (for example, the *Histories* by Herodotus, which Celsus often refers to) while Romans used, during wars, to call the enemies’ deities to Rome, where they promised they would build a temple for them.

After the long interruption due to Christianity, today in Europe we see the rebirth of the so-called “ethnic” religions, or, to use a word we are taking back to its ancient meaning, paganism. In Europe we don’t see that restless seeking for one’s origins as we see in America, where there are some wiccans who feel sorry for they don’t have the “right” roots of the tradition they chose^[2]. But it’s true that the pagan path to walk is often chosen on the strength of a sense of belonging, which comes from individual sensibility and not necessarily has an effective connection to a person’s geographical background.

This is more true in Italy, where the ethnic groups, both native and immigrant ones, before and after christianity, merged in various ways and everyone of them leaved its mark on the country; so, before and after the Romans' conquest, ancient populations' religion lived together on the same territory. So an Italian person can have Celtic, Germanic, Italic, Pre-Latin, Latin, Roman, Grecian roots without fully identify with only one of them: this is the sense of belonging who lead someone, for example many of those who find their Roman roots, to feel him/herself as a descendant of one ethnic groups, some others to feel him/herself part, to practise or to study more than one ancient religions, which can all be called traditional. Many of those traditions are probably still buried under the sands of time, some of them are "recovered" in a wiccan way: that's the case of a wiccan current in Veneto, putting on the centre of their practices the ancient Venetic goddess Reitia.

I don't want to enter into the merits of the choice; what I want to present here is some kind of geographic map of ancient polytheistic religions who came across Italy during the centuries before christianity, showing superpositions among them and how they stratified on the territory. To be brief, I won't talk over the most developed religions, those which are the most known and exerted a strong influence on Italic paganism: I mean Grecian religion, coming from the colonies of Magna Graecia since VIII century a.e.v.[\[3\]](#), Etruscan religion, Celtic religion, Phoenician religion and Roman religion, which developed from the union of Italic, Etruscan and later Grecian elements. But in Italy the Germanic element didn't lack, under the guise of the Cimbrian, who settled on the Alps and in northern Italy. The complexity of those religion and the abundance of information we have, if we compare it to the scarcity of sources we have about other ancient Italic religions, make it very difficult to discuss them here, where I simply want to give an overview of religious situation in Italy from the beginning to Rome. All those religion deserve a better elaboration (to which I will apply myself) also about the links among them I just sketched here.

The Italian peninsula was occupied since the Palaeolithic era; the most ancient archaeological finds go back to about 850000 years ago. Since the Palaeolithic we can distinguish three different cultures, with different kind of tombs, all with rich outfits. These three groups fragmented still further during the Mesolithic, when we can date the so-called "Venuses", little sculptures with marked feminine features. During the Neolithic, some new populations, coming from the East by sea or from the Danubian basin, came to Italy and brought some important innovations, like agriculture and ceramic. These populations also had a great surgical knowledge and could

do the trapanning of the skull, making the patient to survive. Later the use of metals spread in the peninsula.

During the Eneolithic, cultural groups established and spread: in this period, in the region now called Emilia, developed the civilization of “*terramaras*”, characterized by palafitte and manufacts spread in the whole Central-southern Italy. In the same period started in Europe the spreading of Indo-European languages coming from East in consecutive waves.

So the eldest local population are born in proto-historic Europe; later other immigrant population will arrive and add to them. In this article, because of its features of synthesis, I won't dwell long on archaeological and social features of every civilization, but I'll try to focus my attention, as much as possible and even when I'll be forced to simply make a list of deities' names, on religious aspects of those civilizations. Although, it's necessary to keep in mind that ancient “pagan” cultures didn't separate sacred and profane as monotheistic religions do, but everything had a sacred part and a profane (as we will define it nowadays) one.

Ancient sources pass down some names [\[4\]](#) of ancient populations living in the peninsula before Latins and Osco-Umbrian, but for these names we don't have a strict definition nor enough finds to identify them accurately: the **Ausonians**, ancient inhabitants of Samnius, whose name we find in Virgil's work, belong to this group. Maybe the word indicates all the ancient non-Grecian inhabitants of the area, but if they really were a civilization, they extinguished during V century a.e.v. The same can be said about the **Oenotrii**, ancient inhabitants of Southern Italy before Sabellian populations' arrival. Some traces of their language remain in dialects, some tombs were found and Cato passes down three names of tribus (*Coni, Morgetes, Vitales*).

In ancient Italy there were also other populations whose origin we don't know for certain, but which are probably non-Indo-European: **Sardinians**, whose civilization is called “nuraghic”; **Sicanians**, inhabitants of that island that Homer calls “Sikania” from their name, now Sicily, and their neighbours the **Elimi**; in current Veneto **Rhaetians** and **Euganeans**; the Villanovan civilization, ancestors of Etruscans; and above all the **Ligurians**.

The Sardinian nuraghic civilization's religion was a naturalistic one, perceiving deities in natural elements. Their sanctuaries were built between 1300 and 900 a.e.v. and were used, as in other ancient cultures, also as a

market place and for politic meetings; at their centre there was a well-temple, consisting in a doorway at ground level, a stair going down under the ground, a sunken room with a false dome vault and the sacred spring just down the stairs. On the ground, the sacred area was delimited by a stone fence. There are still about forty of those well-temples dedicated to water deities (water is very precious in a so dry region as Sardinia is); a christian rural church was often placed side-by-side to them. Sardinians prosecuted their ancestors' cults, worshipping a Mother Goddess and a Bull God, both deities of fertility, being the two forces who combine to generate life, whose cult was someway linked to the cult of the dead. The tombs they built were collective and enormous, with a semicircular façade in a bull's horns shape and a stele with a little door to go inside the tomb. All around this tombs, called "Giants' tombs" because of their impressive dimensions, there were some stone sedilia on which the dead ones' relatives can sleep, maybe to communicate with their dearest in dreams, practising the incubation. In front of the tombs there were some "betili", a sardinian word meaning little menhirs, phallic symbols of fertility carved with two eyes or two breasts: the betili having eyes were guardian deities of the dead, the betili having breasts represent the unity of the male deity with the feminine one to bring back the life. Sardinians had other kind of temples, the temple in a cave with a stalagmite for altar and a sacrificial fireplace, and the temple with rectangular plan. We have some remaining examples of both, but we don't know who was the deity they were consecrated to; temples in caves are supposed to be consecrated to chthonian deities. Later, Sardinian were affected by Grecian and Carthaginian people; during Roman period, an ancient local god was known under the name of Sardus Pater (father Sardo): this god derived from or was similar to the Carthaginian god Baal. Ancient mythographers believed that Sardus Pater was Hercules' son, and that Hercules came to Sardinia from Libia (so he can be considered son of Hercules-Melqart, a Graeco-Roman interpretation of the Phoenician god Melqart).

Homer calls the other Italian big island "Sicania", from the name of its ancient inhabitants, the Sicanians, who were pushed to the western part of Sicily by the Sicels. Thucydides said that Sicanians already lived in the island during Trojan war but they came from Iberia across Italy, while according to Antiochus and Thymeus Sicanians are native of Sicily. We know very little about them, because they lost their ethnic features during the IV century a.e.v. under Grecian and Phoenician influence. The same lot was shared by the *Elimi*, who ancient authors believed to be native of southern Italy, of which the *Oenotrii* pushed them out (Hellanicus), or to be

a group originated in Asia from the union between Trojan exiles and other people (Thucydides); they underwent a quick process of hellenization and disappeared under Carthaginian rule during I century a.e.v. According to contemporary scholars, they could have a Sicanian origin, or a Ligurian one; somebody believes they are Semites, a mixed population of Persians, Phoenicians and Trojans, whose name may come from that of the region Elam. Their main deity was a goddess belonging to the group of Mother Goddesses (with this name anthropologists call all ancient goddesses with maternal features and related to fertility): her main sanctuary stood on mount Erice and this goddess was called Aphrodite by Grecians and Venus by Romans, but she has also something in common with the Phoenician Astarte. Venus *Ericina* (Venus of mount Erice) has an ear of wheat as her symbol and she's represented with a dog and other animals by her side (she's a "potnia theron", a "Mistress of animals"); her rites were celebrated outside, so that the dew could wash the stains due to sacrifices. Her cult was admitted in Rome, but with some restrictions on it because Roman magistrates thought it contravened Romans' sense of decency; Venus *Ericina*'s day was on the 23rd of April, that was also the day of *Vinalia*, but the cult of the goddess was reserved to seventeen cities of Sicily, probably *Elimi*'s cities, which had the honour of presenting a wreath to her, and to prostitutes (because of this, some scholars believed that sacred prostitution was practised around the original temple in Sicily), while it was forbidden to other women to take part to it. Main *Elimi*'s city was Segesta: a Roman agricultural deity has the same name and her symbol was an ear of wheat like Venus *Ericina*'s, but the relation between the two is not clear.

In present region of Veneto, before of the arrival of palaeovenetic culture, there were two non-indoeuropean population, who left traces in names of local mountains: Rhaetian Alps derive their name from the Rhaetians, while the Euganean Hills from the Euganeans. We don't know much about these two populations: the Rhaetians are supposed to be an ensemble of population including some groups coming from Illyria (from which the Palaeovenetics came, too) and Celtic groups also, while the Euganean are supposed to be part of the Ligurian culture, and were divided into *Stoni*, *Camuni* (who made rupestrian figures in Val Camonica) and *Triumpilini* (who made rupestrian figures of Val Trompia). Both Rhaetians and Euganeans merged with Celts, Etruscans and later Venetics.

On the contrary, we have enough about Etruscan religion, which influenced the Roman one as Grecians did (for a long time, the scholars believed that the Etruscans had been cultural mediators between Grecians and Romans but later direct contacts between these two cultures were

proved), just as Etruscans joined Roman society: it goes without saying that three among the seven legendary kings of Rome were Etruscans. Etruscan language seems not to belong to Indo-European stock, while their alphabet had a Grecian origin: in their turn, Etruscans taught it to various population settled in northern Italy, but not, as it seems, to Latins, who learnt it directly by Grecians. Many hypotheses were made about the origin of Etruscan people: the autochthonal theory was abandoned after the discovery of Lemnos' inscriptions, made in a non-Grecian language, but very similar to the Etruscan one, so someone believes that Etruscans were descendants of some groups of Lemnos' inhabitants who came to Italy and merged with local population. This union gave rise to Villanovan culture, first germ of the Etruscan one; at the present time, none of the theories about Etruscans' origin can be proved with certainty. Even after this population's decline, their language was used in Rome until the Augustan period, as it was a sacred language, used also for divinatory books, which collected cult and divinatory practices and rules of civilian life, all that was called by Romans "Etruscan subject". Divination is the most known aspect of their religion, they taught to Romans the haruspicy, divination by observation of sacrificial victims' viscera, of birds' flight and of lightnings. Lightnings were particularly revered and were attributes of many deities, who could throw just one at a time, and of Tinia, later identified in Jupiter, a celestial god, who could throw three of them: the first to warn, the second to terrify and the third to destroy. Contrary to what happens with other Italic deities, we know many names of Etruscan deities (in their original version or through the Graeco-Roman *interpretatio*) and we know how the priesthood was organized. According to what Romans passed down to us, Etruscan deities were hierarchically organized and there was a triad of deities at the top, consisting in Tinia, Uni and Menvra, more or less corresponding to Romans' Jupiter, Juno and Minerva; there was also a chthonian triad consisting in Mantus, a god with features similar to those of Grecians' Hades and Bacchus, Mania and another goddess, Phersipnei (Persephone) or Serfue (Ceres). Among Etruscan deities, we can distinguish deities with an Etruscan origin (Amharia, justice and revenge, Cautha, solar deity, Cilens, Colalp, Ethausva, Letham, Tecum, Thufthta, Tulusco and, known under his Latin name, Vertumnus or Voltumnus, the turn of seasons), deities of Grecian origin or that we know with Hellenic features (Fufuns-Dionysus, Sethlans-Hephaestus, Turms-Hermes, Turan-Aphrodite, Aplu-Apollo, Artume-Artemis, Hercle-Hercules, Aita-Hades, Phersipnei-Persephone), deities of Italic origin (Maris-Mars, Nethuns-Neptune, Menvra-Minerva, Usil-Sun), Latin or Latinized deities (Uni-Juno, Ani-Janus, Selvans-Sylvan, Satre-Saturn, Vetis-Veiovis). Near the Etruscan city of Capena, there was

the *Lucus Feroniae*, goddess *Feronia*'s sacred wood, dedicated to a Sabine deity. Priests compiled the calendar on a lunar basis; there was also a high priest who led the priesthood and was elected every year during federal festival of *Fanum Voltumnae*. The Etruscans' religion is subject of many studies, so I won't spread here about it, just as I won't deal here with Grecian, Roman, Celtic and Phoenician religion, which are basic for Italian paganism, but for which I refer the reader to more exhaustive studies, as there are some deserving ones.

Ligurians were considered, even by ancient authors, the most ancient population in Italy. Certainly it was one of the biggest and was settled in the major part of western Alpine region before the Celtic expansion during V-IV century a.e.v. After the Celts' coming, Ligurians merged with them and were known as Celtic-Ligurians. Their original language, before the strong Indo-European influence exerted by Celts, is supposed to be similar to the Rhaetians', so Ligurians were not Indo-Europeans. Like the Celts, Ligurians were divided into various groups and we can hardly distinguish Celts from Ligurians among the names of northern Italy inhabitants, because their union was very deep-rooted: we can say that Ligurians were Apuans, who Romans brought to Samnius, *Bagienni*, *Friniates*, settled between Lucca and Modena, *Ingauni*, who subjected other Ligurians, *Intimilii* and *Sabati*; and also *Lepontii*, whose belonging to Ligurians was supposed on the basis of toponymy, their pre-Indo-European dialect and the custom to bury corpses, *Levii*, settled around existing city of Pavia, who were bound to *Anamares* and defeated by *Insubres*, *Salassi*, who trade with transalpine populations through Great Saint Bernard pass, sacred to the god *Poeninus*. Other populations in the same area are supposed to be Celts: *Anamares*, settled around Piacenza, Gauls (*Senones*, *Boi*, *Cenomani*, *Sequani*, settled in the Po valley), *Insubres*, settled in current Lombardy, *Taurini*, whose Celtic origins are supposed on the basis of toponomy, *Taurisci*, whose name, like *Taurini*'s, comes maybe from Celtic root *taur-* meaning "mountain". The origin of *Orobii* was unclear to ancient authors also; the merging between Celts and Ligurians is particularly clear in some populations as *Anamares*, *Bagienni*, *Taurini* and *Taurisci*. Ligurians' religion also went under Celtic influence: it might have been a "naturalistic" religion, with a strong cult of forests, woods, peaks and rivers, all worshipping places sometimes pointed out by a simulacrum, a stone or an altar, but deities' names we know had a Celtic origin, probably because of the *interpretatio* the Celts did, in the same way Romans interpreted foreign deities. So a healing deity is called *Bormanus*, while Romans called Jupiter the mountain god *Poeninus*. From the god *Bekkos* takes its name Mount

Bego, full of rupestrian figures; this god was represented half human and half bull: horns or a half animal body are main features of many figures engraved in those rocks. From Celts, Ligurians borrowed the cult of god Belenos, who was worshipped as far as the Adriatic Sea coast. Ligurians also worshipped Hercules, like many other ancient Italian populations. They used to throw personal objects like weapons and jewels in rivers, lakes, marshes and torrents, but we don't know exactly why they did so, as an offer to deities or to prevent everyone from using a dead person's objects. The burial of the dead was the most spread practice until the Bronze Age, then cremation came into use.

When we talk about Italics, we mean all those Indo-European population which came to Italy. They are divided into two groups: Latino-Sicels and Osco-Umbrians (or Umbro-Sabellians or Umbro-Samnites). Among both these groups, relations among various populations had a strong religious feature and leagues of independent cities always had their seat in a sanctuary. They worshipped totemic animals and most of their deities were bound biological cycles and agriculture. Among both groups, even though it happened more often among Osco-Umbrians, the *ver sacrum* (sacred spring) ceremony was practiced: in case of need, that is to say in case of famine or war, all fruits of the earth, animals and children (sometimes only boys) born that spring, among 1st March and 30th April, were consecrated to deities, especially Mars, and while fruits and animals were sacrificed, boys, once they turned twenty, left their original community and went away to found a city in the place where their totemic animal or deity would lead them, then this new group would take their name from the animal or deity. There are also some deities we can call "Italic", because their cult was practised by both Latino-Sicels and Osco-Umbrians: these are, for example, Jupiter worshipped by Latins (Sanctuary of *Iuppiter Latiaris*) and also by Umbrians and Samnites, being mentioned in tables from Gubbio (Umbrians) and Agnone (Samnites), and whose name comes from the Indo-European root meaning the daylight; a deity of fruits, a god according to Osco-Umbrians, a goddess according to Romans, who is Pomona or Pomona; Mars or Mamers or Mamurius, god of war but also patron of agriculture and guide in founding new communities, main god of the *ver sacrum* ceremony, which took place when there were problems in agriculture or about defense.

The most ancient Italic group is the one of Latino-Sicels: archaeologists consider cultures settled around the Tiber mouth and in southern Etruria, those of Latins and *Falisci*, similar to the Sicels', who overlap Sicanians and Elymi in Sicily.

At the beginning, Latins organised in a league of independent cities, having its centre in Diana's temple near Aricia, in the sacred wood of Nemi, guarded by the *Rex Nemorensis*, a priest who was killed by he who wanted to succeed him, generally a fugitive slave, and who stripped away a branch from a tree to declare his own right to fight with this priest. Having language and religious practices in common, Latin cities entered into federations that were more religious ones than politic, whose members gathered during some festivals to make sacrifices in sanctuaries. Main cultic centre was Latian Jupiter's (*Iuppiter Latiaris*) sanctuary, on Mount Cavo, among Albani Hills; here a white bull was sacrificed during the yearly festival of *Feriae Latinae* and meat was distributed among representatives of cities taking part to the league. In *Iuppiter Latiaris*' sacred area there was also a sacred spring of Nymph *Ferentina*, a goddess who should have also a sacred wood we didn't identify. The city of *Lavinium*, being tied to myths about Aeneas, had a sanctuary dedicated to Penates, household gods of fireplaces, to whom salt and emmer were offered. Another important city, which Festus told was related to Etruscans but in which archaeologists didn't find any trace of Etruscan culture but only of Grecian one, was *Tusculum*, hosting a temple dedicated to Jupiter, Latins' main god, of whom two simulacra were found, and one dedicated to the Dioscuri, destroyed during Middle Ages. In *Lanuvium* Iuno *Sospita* (helper), with very bellicose features, was also worshipped.

The *Falisci* belong to the same branch of Latins and their language is very similar to Latin. But they also had close relations with Etruscan, as ancient authors affirmed *Falisci* were an Etruscan group. Their most important city, *Falerii Veteres*, had Minerva as patron and her temple was brought to Rome on the Aventino hill after third Samnite war ending, when the city was destroyed by Romans or, according to some historians, abandoned by the *Falisci* themselves who would find more convenient to move closer to their new allies, the Romans, building a new city, *Falerii Novi*, next to a Roman built road. *Falerii Novi*'s gate dedicated to Jupiter still exists, and some inscriptions demonstrate the existence of cults to Mercury, Ceres and Liber; Juno *quiritis*, with very strong warlike features, was patron of the city. On the top of Mount Soratte there was a temple to Apollo, now replaced by a christian church.

Scholars think that Sicels had established first in Bruzio, then in Sabines' region, finally in Campania before they crossed the Straits of Messina and settled for good in Eastern Sicily, in XI century a.e.v. circa. As it happened to Sicanians and Elimi, Sicels were absorbed by Grecian colonization and took some features of Grecians' religion: they worshipped the "Palici", twin

deities, patrons of navigations and agriculture we know only through Greek legends. Their name itself comes from Greek, meaning “born twice”, because they would be born first from their mother Talia the Nymph, and then from the ground which swallowed Talia at Hera’s command. Their father was Zeus; in this case Zeus was a translation by *interpretatio* of the Sicel god Adrano, known to be father of the “Palici”.

Populations belonging to Osco-Umbrian group came to Italy later and they were: Umbrians, who were settled around Tiber upper basin, Samnites, settled on Abruzzi’s mountains and divided into *Carencini*, *Pentri* and *Caudini*, then *Hirpini*, *Aequi*, *Frentani*, Volscians. Belonging to Samnite stock the Lucanians, *Bruttii*, *Marrucini*, *Marsi*, *Vestini* and Oscans; these were all called Sabellians by the Romans together with the Apulians, former inhabitants of current Apulia before Illyrian populations arrival, and with the Sabins, who could have originated by Umbrians with the migration practice called *ver sacrum*, ritual exodus of young people looking for new places to settle in. Bound to Sabines, there were the Paelignans, once believed to have come from Illyria. Many of these population took their name from a sacred animal (Picenes, *Hirpini*, Lucanians, *Frentani*) or from their patron deity (*Marsi* and *Vestini*). They have some deities in common: Flusa was a goddess of earth or of vegetation in different pantheons, who became the Roman Flora, and then Saku or Sancus, god of pacts and contracts, and, according to Cato, main deity of Sabines, whose name was believed to come from this god’s son’s name, Sabo. In Rome, Sancus became *Semo Sancus*, god who supervised treaties, later identified with *Dius Fidius* and then with Jupiter *Sanctus*, Jupiter watching over given word. During a certain period, the Oscan language was more spread than Latin; it’s as different from Umbrian as Spanish is from Italian, especially after Umbrian cultural renewal, a not very known change in common with Latin, while Oscan remained conservative.

Main sources for studying Umbrians’ religion are Gubbio’s tables, reporting ancient Umbrian texts to be pronounced during some rites performed in the city of Gubbio. One of these still survives in its christianized form: originally it was a rite for purification, in which sacrificial victims, three different animals to honour three different deities, were asperged with water and carried at a run around the city for three times, nowadays people carry at a run three holy candles which are 275 kg heavy along the same path; before running, candles are asperged with water and dedicated to three different saints. The most evident feature of Umbrians’ religion is the deification of nouns, concepts, actions, objects

because of their philosophy, thinking that every abstract concept had its own divine substance: so *Fisovio Sancio* is the god protecting Gubbio's citadel, because he's the divine substance of the rite which is going to be performed. On the same tables we can find a list of sacrificial victims, paired with the most appropriate deity, and there are also vegetal offers every three sacrificial animals, so marking a division of deities in triads, maybe coming from Etruscan culture. To Jupiter Father, many times recalled in tables, an ox was to be offered, an over one year of age victim was to be offered to "Spettore", a male lamb to the "Giovio" (maybe a Jupiter's son, he could be somehow similar to Hercules, whose cult was so spread in Italy), pork lard to Dicamno Giovio, an over one year of age sheep to Atto Giovio, a male pig to Atto Marzio. After the sacrifice to the evoker gods, the rite went on with divination through observation of flight of birds. We don't know whether the Umbrians learnt this practice from Etruscans or Etruscans learnt it from Umbrians; but it should be practised a lot, in fact surnames coming from names of birds are still common in Gubbio. The priest entered into a bond with the deity, who had to ensure the birds' behaviour would be expression of divine power, then the augur went on with divination. This big rite, done for purification and protection on the city and its army, ended with the sacrifice of three calves to Mars *Hodio* and three steers to *Hondo Cerfio*. These animals' meats were eaten keeping silence, with a twist of bread. Music should also have much importance in Umbrians' religion and the tables report instruction about how to construct a musical instrument with the needed sacrifices to Father Jupiter and to "Pomono Popdico", a god also called "Poemune", corresponding to Roman goddess of fruits, *Pomona*. Other inscriptions report the name of the goddess Cubra, later identified with Bonadea by Romans.

The same goddess was worshipped, with her name's phonetic variant of Cupra, by Picenes as a mother goddess of fertility and she was their main deity. There are still two towns with the goddess' name in theirs (Cupra marittima (= by the sea) and Cupra montana (= by the mountains)) and her temple was on Tesino's mouth's left bank. In this area some simulacres were found. According to ancient sources as Strabo or Pliny the Elder, the Picenes had their roots in Sabines from which they born by the *ver sacrum* ceremony, and established in current Marches following a woodpecker (in latin *picus*), a bird sacred to Mars, from which they took their name. It seems to be that this Osco-Umbrian group settled breaking up into families and tribes and merging with other inhabitants of the same region, a pre-Indo-European population which we don't know much more about: this is the reason why some archaeologists prefer to call *Picentes* the

former group and Picenes the latter. Picene culture never had unitary features and it varied from town to town, even though towns sometimes gathered into confederations. They traded with other population settled on Adriatic coasts such as Etruscans, Illyrians, *Daunii* and *Liburni*; some modern historians think that *Liburni* influenced Picenes' culture by settling in the same region.

South of Umbrians and Picenes, the Sabines, speaking Oscan and culturally close to Samnites, settled on Central Apennines. They were one of the most ancient populations in Italy and soon merged with Romans, to whom they handed down the pride they had in common with Samnites and the adherence to frugal customs and rural values we can find in archaic Roman writers, like Catone, who reports the presupposition that the Sabines' name came from Sabo, son of Sancus, their main god, phonetic variant of Umbrian Saku, but this presupposition has no serious bases. Apart from Sancus-Saku, Umbrian religion and Sabine had much more in common: Sabines also worshipped the male parallel of Roman goddess Pomona, calling him Poimuni. Their goddesses Ardoina and Curi were identified respectively with Diana and Juno.

Vestini were very similar to Sabines. They settled in the Aterno valley and on Adriatic coast of current Abruzzo. They are known for the statue of the so-called Capestrano warrior; their name may come from the goddess Vesta, who became goddess of fireplace, home and preservation of life. Along the same river the *Marrucini* settled; they were an Osco-Umbrian population, too, and they might have been a branch of *Marsi* which moved north; both names may come from god Mars'.

We know very little about other Osco-Umbrian groups' religion such as *Aequi*'s or *Hernici*'s, apart from what we can deduce from their belonging to this branch of Italic populations. We can deduce from *Marsi*'s name that they could practise a strong cult to the god Mars or that they might be born from a *ver sacrum* ceremony, as ancient sources say. *Marsi* settled at first in Sabine region, then moved to the region called Marsica from their name, under Umbrian pressure. Romans told that *Marsi* were snake-charmers or immune to their bite, so the snake should have had an important religious or totemic role among them, a role we can imagine linked to healing if we observe a christian rite which takes place in the same region nowadays, consisting in covering saint Dominic's statue with snakes that are to be touched and taken by believers who want to heal or to preserve health. *Marsi*'s goddess Angizia held knowledge of medicinal herbs, of which they were experienced, and was a snake-charmer too.

The Paelignans settled in Samnio region, on Abruzzo's Apennines, and made the Marsic league with *Marsi*, *Marrucini*, and *Vestini*; once they were believed to be of Illyric origins, but their language is Oscan. We don't know much about their culture, because they romanized very quickly after the defeat they suffered during social war. The same happened with *Frentani*, inhabitants of basins of Fortore, Tiferno and Sangro rivers, on Adriatic coast of current Abruzzo and Molise. Their name may come from the word meaning "deer", the sacred animal who led them during the *ver sacrum* from which they took origin.

The Volscians founded some cities which survived during Roman period: Antium, with a patron goddess who was interpreted as Fortune but had a larger "sphere of competence": she was a goddess linked to fertility, birth, healing especially of reproductive organs, but also to navigation and agriculture; Anxur, where there were a temple dedicated to *Iuppiter anxurus* or Jupiter as a child, built in IV century a.e.v., over which Sulla made another temple to be built. Cassino is a Volscian city too, and there are traces of a cult to a deity of waters, later identified with Apollo.

Certainly Samnites are the most known among Osco-Umbrians, because of their pride and opposition to Roman conquest: these qualities are disclosed in books, where the role they had in Roman culture's development is often forgotten. In facts, Atellans, farces of scurrilous humor, have a Samnite origin and were taken by Roman first attempt of literary production. For long Samnites were believed not to be a urban population: actually, while Samnites living on the mountains stayed reserved and conservative, those living in plains opened to influences coming from other populations, Grecians included, and rebuilt some cities: Pompeii, Etruscan city, was rebuilt by Samnites as the temple consecrated to fertility goddess of sulphurous waters, Mefitis, worshipped especially by Samnites, demonstrates; near the city of Capena, in southern Latium, there was a sacred area called in Latin *lucus Feroniae*, the wood sacred to the goddess Feronia, linked to springs and woods, whose cult was spread all over Central Italy: under Roman rule, this sacred area was widened. As we have information about Umbrian religion from Gubbio's tables, so we have information about Samnite religion from Agnone's tables, regulating the practice of cult inside the sacred enclosure of Agnone, consecrated mainly to Ceres (Kerres, in their language) and subordinately to sixteen deities listed in these tables, often called "Kerriais", meaning "Cereal" and thereby "who makes grow", referring to their function of inducing growth and coming from the name of the goddess Ceres, goddess of vegetation and harvest. These deities are: Vezkei, in Latin Veiovis; Evklui Paterei, Father

Euclo, called Hades or Hermes by Grecians, so he may have been a psychopomp god; Futrei Kerriai, Ceres' daughter; Anter Statai, or Stata Mater for Latins; Ammai Kerriai, Maia, Italic goddess of Spring, later identified with her Greek namesake, Hermes' mother; Diumpais Kerriais, Nymphs of springs; Liganakdikei Entrai, deity of vegetation and fruits; Anafriss Kerriuis, Nymphs of rain; Maatus Kerriuis, dew's goddess; Diuvei Verehasiui, or in Latin Jupiter *Virgator*, whipper, maybe someway bound to *Lupercalia* rites, during which some priests hit with leather straps the hands of women stretching out them to ensure fertility; Diuvei Regaturei, Jupiter *Pluvius*, who makes it raining; Hereklui Kerriui, Hercules; Patanai Piistiai, goddess of wine making; Deivai Genetai, in Latin *Mana Geneta*; Pernai Kerriai, Latins' *Pales*, goddess of sheep farming; Fluusai, Flora, goddess of earth and patron of sprouts. Samnites living near Agnone paid a tax for sacred enclosure's maintenance and tables says that the enclosure belongs to those who paid this decima and have the right to attend it. There were fifteen altars inside this sacred garden; rites honouring Flora were performed outside it. Agnone's sacred garden is an example of what Samnites' first worshipping places looked like: they were open spaces, woods and valleys; only later Samnites began building sanctuaries, the most known of which is the sanctuary near Pietrabbondante, federal sanctuary of Samnite League. It had a big temple with three cellae and three altars dedicated to three deities, one of which was the goddess Victory, and a theatre. The architecture of this sanctuary shows consequences of the influence exerted by Grecians since VI century a.e.v. Mamerte, parallel to Latins' Mars, was a very important god; his comrade-in-arms was the god Heres; like Sabines, Samnites worshipped Famel, goddess of earth. Lucina, goddess of birth, was a so important goddess that first Romans adopted her as an independent goddess and later her name became one of Juno's appellations. Samnites had a sacred animal, like other Osco-Umbrian populations; theirs was the bull, while the cock was Samnite league's sign.

Hirpini had the wolf as sacred animal and their name comes from the Samnite word for wolf, *hirpus*. They were an Oscan-speaking population, settled in southern Sannio, where Romans founded the colony of *Beneventum*. They, or their priests, were also called *Hirpi Sorani* (wolves of mount Soratte, from the place where this cult was celebrated); the historiographer Servius said that *Hirpini* practised the cult to *Dis Pater*, a Latin deity of underworld, with whom the original deity must have been identified, so some scholars believe that the adjective "Sorani" may come

from Suri, an Etruscan underworld god. *Hirpini* also practised fire-walking, walking on coals with bare feet.

Lucanians' sacred animal was the wolf, too, if we consider their name as given to them by Grecians, coming from the word meaning wolf, *lukos*; according to some philologists, their name is rather derived from the Latin word for "sacred wood", *lucus*.

To their south, the *Bruttii* settled in current Calabria; ancient historiographers said they were shepherds or servants to Lucanians, but soon rebelled against them. They were a rough and nomadic population who conquered many cities of Magna Graecia before being defeated by Romans during the Punic Wars, when they were Hannibal's allies. Archaeological findings demonstrate that they never founded real cities and their settlements consisted in an *oppidum* (fortification) and its connected *villae*. We don't have traces of their culture.

The third Indo-European wave came from Illyria, preceding those of Grecians, Celts and Germans: various populations crossed the Adriatic and settled in current Apulia, between Abruzzo and Marches where overlapped to Osco-Umbrians population (Picenes) or in current Veneto. In Apulia, Illyrians were *Daunii*, *Peucetii* and Messapians; *Liburni* settled in Picene region: we don't know much about their religion because they merged with local Osco-Umbrians so that some historians believe Illyrian influences to be the result of relations at a distance and that *Liburni* never really settled in Italy; so *Veneti* were Illyrians too, and archaeologists prefer calling them Palaeoveneti, to avoid confusion with other populations reported under the same name, for example a Celtic group settled in Brittany, skilful navigators defeated by Cesar.

This confusion derives from uncertain origins of the name *Veneti*: it may come from the root ven- meaning "loved, friend", and thereby *Veneti* means "members of groups united by blood ties", or may come from a similar root meaning "to win" and so *Veneti* means "winners"; so *Veneti* is a generic name. The *Veneti* we are talking about may be, according to some sources, the *Enetoi* (Greek word for "praiseworthy") mentioned in Iliad as a population coming from Paflagonia and by Herodotus as an Adriatic population, known to Grecians and then to Romans as skilful horse breeder. The so ancient use of this name doesn't implies the existence of an original group later divided. The *Palaeoveneti* came from Illyria in XIII century a.e.v.; their language, attested by inscriptions, is an Indo-European language with similarities with Italic, Greek and Germanic branch, while their

alphabet derives from the Etruscan alphabet of the city of Chiusi by adding the Greek letter O (in fact, this sound doesn't exist in Etruscan language) and they have a syllabic script. The Palaeovenetic culture is also called "atestina", meaning "of the city of Este", being this city their principal centre, near which there were four temples. The main one was dedicated to the goddess Reitia, connected to healing, as the ex-votos found around it show, but also to writing, as many alphabetic tablets and styli for writing have been found near the temple. Maybe the sanctuary contained also schools. The other temples were dedicated to the Dioscuri (Greek *interpretatio* of twin deities, common feature among Indo-European religions), to a warlike goddess whose name is not known, and the fourth may have been an *auguraculum* (a place where divination was practised). Most of Venetic temples are near waters; in Cadore region (Alps of current region Veneto) there was a temple consecrated to a triform goddess or to the god Trumusiate; near Abano's thermal spring the cult of Hercules was practised and there was a temple to the god Apono.

Iapyges was the collective noun for all the Illyrian population settled in current Apulia, who were believed to come from Crete according to some ancient sources: *Sallentini*, Calabrians, Messapians, *Peucetii*, *Daunii*. We don't know much about *Sallentini*, Calabrians and *Peucetii*; we know something more about *Daunii* and Messapians.

Daunii settled in northern Apulia; they didn't pass down much of their religion, but there remains some anthropomorphic stelae, bearing arms and hands drawn on them. Male stelae have an armor drawn on them, female ones a dress; some have a pin at the top, on which a head should be put. The of the entity drawn on the stele, which may be related to commemoration of dead people, was shown by other drawings: jewels, weapons, spheroid graphemes, coloured scenes with people and animals. Scenes are different according to the stele's sex: male stelae have fighting and hunting scenes, while female ones have a great variety of themes. On the latter representations of opium poppies were noticed, so it is thought the *Daunii* used this flower not only for healing, but also for ecstatic and religious purposes.

Messapians settled in southern Apulia; they went to Italy during the Iron Age and stayed in touch with other Illyrian populations, both with those on the opposite coast of Adriatic and with those who came to Italy too, especially with *Veneti*. Some ancient historiographer, for example Herodotus, said Messapians were descendant of Cretans, who merged with local population. Messapian language is attested by many public, funerary,

votive and numismatic inscriptions in Greek alphabet from Taranto and it is an Illyrian language. Their religion went under Grecians' influence so that some Messapian deities have names which are very similar to those of Greek deities. In Torre dell'Orso's and Roca's inscriptions there are some names of typically Messapian deities: Tator or Taotor, one of the most important gods, or Batio, who was worshipped in brambles (and so his name, from the Messapian word for bramble) and represented sometimes as a god and sometimes as a goddess breast-feeding her child. Later, Batio was identified with Jupiter and worshipped as Jupiter Batio, but the cult of the goddess of growth survived in post-messapian period. Ana was another goddess, later identified with Aphrodite, as in a dedication on a capital to Aphrodite Ana.

This is the general picture of Italian situation. Of course, it's only an overview, just to give an idea of complexity and tissue of populations in the territory of what we call Italy nowadays. Even though I introduced them as distinct populations, actually they overlapped everywhere until they definitively merged under Roman rule.

The Federazione Pagana doesn't have a predominant ethnic-religious orientation (except in "numeric" sense of word, I mean for what concerns the majority of members) and so its purpose is to support development of paganism in Italy and thereby of these paganisms and others and to let every single person search for his/her historic and emotional roots.

Manuela Simeoni

[2] It's what happens with those who start studying "stregheria", but they believe they can't practice it or they won't find a master because they don't have Italian ancestors.[Back](#)

[3] Ante Era Vulgare: before current era, it means b.c.[Back](#)

[4] From now on, I will use mainly Latin names of population where I couldn't find the English word for them. Latin names are in italic.[Back](#)