

James Byres: a note on Catholicism, Jacobitism, and the Etruscans

This note focuses on an aspect of James Byres of Tonley (1734-1817) which is little explored: the fact that he was a member of a culturally significant minority, and that his work on the Etruscans was to some degree inflected by his heritage. Like Thomas Dempster of Muiresk (1579-1625) before him, he was a member of one of the many Aberdeenshire gentry families who had remained Roman Catholic at the reformation. In a prosperous region remote from central government, and under the patronage of the powerful families of Gordon and Seton¹, the sufferings of the Aberdeenshire Catholics were much mitigated by local toleration and accommodation. They were not the objects of any sustained political coercion or penalty until the Jacobite campaigns and risings which followed the flight of James VII and II in 1688. Although military and professional careers in Britain remained theoretically closed to them, many Aberdeenshire Catholics prospered on the continent, in the wine trade and, most notably, as mercenary soldiers.² It was through such networks, partly based on kinship, that the parents of James Byres made their escape after the catastrophic defeat at Culloden of the Jacobite rising of 1745-46, and arrived eventually in Rome, where Byres was to make his career as antiquarian, *cicerone* and art dealer.³

¹ Peter Davidson, 'Alexander Seton, first Earl of Dunfermline: his library, his house, his world' *British Catholic History*, (May, 2015) volume 32/03, pp.315-42.

² A detailed prosopography is to be found in Tom McNally, *The Sixth Scottish University: the Scots Colleges Abroad* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012); see also David Worthington, *Scots in Habsburg Service* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004) Byres's uncle by marriage, Robert Gordon of Hallhead (d.1737) was a wine merchant in Bordeaux and may well have acted as a banker for exiled Jacobites after the rising of 1715.

³ Cf. Brinsley Ford, 'James Byres, Principal Antiquarian for the English Visitors to Rome', *Apollo*, 99 (June 1974), pp 446-61; John Ingamells, *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy, 1701-1800* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), the biography of Byres is on pp. 169-172. There are also biographies of his friends and associates: Andrew Lumisden is on 616-17; Colin Morison, pp. 679-82; Christopher Norton, pp. 715-16.; Harry Gordon Slade, 'James Byres of Tonley (1734-1817): the architecture of a Scottish Cicerone', *Architectural Heritage* II, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991) pp. 18-28.

The aspect of penal-times Catholic and Jacobite culture which Byres would have absorbed axiomatically and unconsciously from his background (just as he acquired the northern-Scottish habits of speech still identifiably present in his adult orthography) would have been the habit of looking at the past, including the remote past, in a particularly intense relation to the present. This could take the form of looking to antiquity for precedent and authority: the (beautiful and almost-unknown) Jacobite Latin epic, the *Graemidos* of James Phillip (1691) advanced the claim of James VII and II to his throne as unquestionable through one word – ‘Fergusius’—‘descendent of Fergus,’ King of Scotland in unbroken succession from the mythical founder of the realm, King Fergus⁴. Thus he sets up an opposition between an indigenous King of ancient descent defending his kingdom against an aggressive invader: in Philip’s work William III is simply ‘Batavus’, ‘the Dutchman.’ This Jacobite epic, too incendiary for print, circulated widely in manuscript through an efficient system of scribal copies, exactly the kind of reading to commend itself to James Byres’ father. Alternatively, there was a deep-seated tendency throughout early-modern Britain to read history analogically: ancient events presented in direct parallel with the present. This is particularly found in the Catholic community in the plays of the exiled Jesuit Colleges on the continent: the present persecution of the British Catholics being expressed by the pagan persecution of early British Christians or by the Byzantine iconoclast persecution of those who still honoured sacred images⁵. Christopher Highley formulates a particularly clear form of words to describe these confessional and political apprehensions of the past:

⁴Cf James Philip, ed. Alexander Murdoch, *The Graemid* (Edinburgh:Scottish History Society, 1888). The legendary line of kings were very widely believed to have been real, Hector Boece’s *Historia Scotorum* (1527) gave the legend an apparently-unquenchable vitality. The ‘Room of Kings’ or Gallery at Holyrood Palace, finished in 1684 for Charles II, with its sequence of (mostly fictional) Kings of Scotland painted by Jacob de Witt, was a wholly serious expression of the historical beliefs of Stuart-loyalist Scots. Cf. John Gifford, Colin McWilliam, David Walker, *The Buildings of Scotland, Edinburgh* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), pp.145-46.

⁵ This subject is expertly handled in Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

We should remember that antiquarian works are as much about the present as the past, and that like all text, their meanings are not fixed but contingent: as the cultural circumstances surrounding the production and reception of texts change, so text accrue new meanings.⁶

No early modern history is free of contemporary allusion or implication, and there is no antiquarian activity which cannot read the past allegorically as a reflection on the present, and this is perhaps particularly true of Scotland, the country from which Byres originated. This assertion is supported by the comparatively late date of foundation of the society of antiquaries of Scotland, from 1780⁷, and the anxieties surrounding the study of antiquities which can be inferred from William Smellie's note on that foundation in the first volume of *Archaeologica Scotica*, as late as 1792.⁸ In this, he implies that only the death in 1766 of the last credible Stuart pretender to the thrones of England and Scotland, James Francis Edward Stuart, had cleared the way for licit antiquarian activity in Scotland:

Till we were cordially united with England, not in government only, but in loyalty and affection to a common sovereign, it was not perhaps altogether consistent with political wisdom to call the attention of the Scots to the ancient honours and constitution of their ancient monarchy.⁹

Byres's own position on Etruscans inevitably inflected by Catholic and Jacobite historiography¹⁰-- like Thomas Dempster of Muiresk before him he is attracted to continuities

⁶ Christopher Highley, *Catholics Writing the Nation in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p.110.

⁷ The Society received its Charter in May, 1783, cf. Ronald G. Cant, 'David Steuart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan: Founder of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland' in A.Bell (ed.) *The Antiquarian Tradition in Scotland* (Edinburgh:John Donald, 1981), p.16.

⁸ Vol. I, iv., cited in Bell, p.28

⁹ Bell, p.10.

¹⁰ Peter Davidson, 'James Byres of Tonley: Jacobites and Etruscans' *Recusant History* (October 2010), pp.261-74.

beginning in the remote past. In Dempster's *De Etruria Regali* (completed in MS 1619, published by Filippo Buonarroti in Florence 1726) he asserts that the ancient monarchy of Etruria has been revived in the rule of the Medici Grand Dukes:

Hetruriam bello juxta, pacesque olim florentam, ac bis mille annis Regibus parenem,
variasque humanae vicissitudinis vices expertam, nunc tandem sub Serenissimis
principibus Monarchio imperio restitutam¹¹

In fact, local historical traditions attributed other origins to both Florence and its ruling family.

Byres's own observations, in his 1766 Journal of a tour to Sicily, recording a visit to the collection of the 'Prince de Biscaris' makes it clear that the relations between the cultures of Greece and Etruria in antiquity were only beginning to come into focus for his generation of antiquarians, a process in which his own work was to play a small but not unimportant part:

He has an exelent colection of Etrusk Vases some very antient found at Comarina
some with Etrusken, some Egyptian, and some with Greek figurs on them, and with
Greek and Etrusken inscriptions which I think shows that the Nations had great
communication together and boroud ther artes from one another.¹²

The subterranean Etruscan tombs at Corneto had been known since the early eighteenth century, but interest in them was revived by etchings of their wall-paintings published by Byres's associate Piranesi in 1765 (it seems possible that Byres either accompanied him on the visit on which he made the drawings, or visited the tombs independently in the early 1760s.) It seems likely that he made his manuscript drafts for a history of the Etruscans, now

¹¹ P. Bruschetti, ed., *Seduzione Etrusca* (Milan: Skira, 2014), p. 286.

¹² National Library of Scotland, MS 10339, f. 54r His conclusions are to a degree in accord with those of Mario Guarnacci, in his *Origini Italiche* (Lucca, 1767-72) which Byres notes in NLS MS Inv Dep 184B that he has read and epitomised.

in the National Library of Scotland,¹³ from around this time, although these fragmentary drafts were possibly made over a considerable period of time, they contain a note referring to Guarnacci's first volume of 1762 and by 1767 Byres was certainly canvassing for subscribers.¹⁴ All the notes now in the National Library of Scotland are presumably drafts of text to accompany Byres's visual recording of the wall paintings from Corneto, which survive as the sepias by Smuglewicz in the von Wagner collection at Würzburg, and the engraved plates by Christopher Norton which were to wait so long for publication. Byres had gathered subscribers for the publication of this work by the end of the 1760s, but the etched copperplates were left behind when he returned to Scotland permanently in 1790, and were detained for the duration of the Napoleonic wars at Livorno in packing cases with other effects belonging to Byres's nephew, Patrick Moir, until 1817. They were finally printed posthumously at London in 1842, in a folio entitled *Hypogaei or Sepulchral Caverns of Tarquinia*, but with minimal text, and essentially as a pendant to Mrs Hamilton Grey's *A Tour to the Sepulchres of Etruria in 1839*, published at London in 1843.

Byres was fascinated by the achievements of these 'first people of Italy' and regarded their subjugation by the Romans as barbaric. Within the historiographic tradition which Byres inherited it would have been very easy to think of them as comparable to the Jacobite northern Scots. From the fragmentary drafts and notes in Byres's manuscript remains, it is clear that some parallel of this kind was at the centre of his thinking. He dwells on the

¹³ NLS MS Inv Dep 184B

¹⁴ As witness the signed receipt for a deposit for the work in Aberdeen University Library, 'vouchers and receipts' file. The set of drawings by Byres for a re-facing of King's College, in the MS 'K' series in Aberdeen presumably date from the same visit to Scotland.

Romans as uncivilised, destructive conquerors in the draft headed 'History of the Etruscans/Section 1st/The antient state of Italy¹⁵:

Nothing can be more incertain then the accounts left us by the antients of the first inhabitants. Tis is principaly owing in the first place to the Roman Conquestes and their ignorant Vanity in the arley time of the Republic when ignorant of letters they dispised al artes and sciences except that of Ware living principally on the spoils fo their nibours in subduing the Etruscans and other nations. . .befor they had aquaired a teast for nolege themselves they put a stope to the Prograce of Scitence and the Vanity of apering the onely great nation probably indared them to destroy the Etruscan records which perhaps showed the meanes of ther origin which probably wanted to Conceal.

He also begins to try to argue a closeness between the Gaels of Britain and Ireland and the ancient inhabitants of Italy. This is part of a speculation about all of Europe being peopled from the same stock, scattered by the deluge, but also shows an undercurrent of hope that affinities will emerge between Etruscan and Gael. Most of the argument is based on very speculative guesses about language, a wild hope that Gaelic or Welsh will prove the key to Etruscan:

Ti or Ty in the Celtic signifies a House and Tan or Taen fire Titan the house of fire. . . Celtic Alp or Alb white being generally coverd with snow. The Celtes in the asiatick provinces especially was verey earley called Titans which in Celtic signifies sons of the Earth and answers to Aborigines a neam assumed by the Umbriens a tribe of the same nation in Italy. . . to endeavour to . . . write down all the antient neams of Men

¹⁵ The folder of manuscript which relates to Byres' Etruscan project is not foliated, and consists of loose sheets as well as three stitched gatherings with different attempts at a discursive treatment of the subject. It seems counter-productive to invent a foliation which does not apply to visibly foliated leaves.

and Pleses in Italy particularly Tuscany to get them explained by the Erse or Welsh.

To write down the Etruscan inscriptions in the Roman Character from the different Etruscan alphabets and see if they can be explained by the same language.

It is to a British tradition of historical analogy amongst those living under penalty and in eclipse that Byres's Etruscans form an epilogue – civilised, skilled in the arts, indigenous to their territories, in correspondence with the most cultivated peoples of the known world, yet silenced, defeated and written out of history by their aggressive and victorious neighbours to the south. The Catholic and Jacobite Scots of the north, were particularly aware of the mythical origins of the Romans from their own endless appropriation of the epic of the exiled Prince, the *Aeneid*. In parallel to this, it is not difficult to see how the Etruscans might have come to resonate with their own mysterious ancestors who had left the north eastern half of Scotland rich in pictorial stone monuments, undeciphered when inscribed. ¹⁶

Byres has particular reason to champion Etruscan against Roman. For the enemies who had driven his family into exile, for the lowland Calvinist, the Presbyterian Whig, the whole story of Scotland's past is one of fragmentation and subjugation. Most important of all to those who negotiated the 1707 Union with England, and who subsequently fought off what they perceived as the Jacobite threat in 1715 and 1745, was a notion of their own *difference* from the Gaelic-speaking Highlanders from the north west of the kingdom, and the Catholic and Episcopalian Jacobites of the north east. According to such an authority as John Clerk of Penicuik, the lowland Scots are derived from the English tribe of the Brigantes and are therefore a people distinct from the inhabitants of the north not only by origin, but by inclusion within the pale of Roman civilisation, within the frontier of Empire which nascent

¹⁶ If we need a note here on Pictish symbol and ogham stones (whose geographical distribution does roughly accord with the territories predominantly Jacobite) we should probably just reference George and Isobel Henderson.

archaeology was recognising in the structure now known as the Antonine Wall, although there were optimistic Whig attempts throughout the eighteenth century to set the *limes* of the Roman Empire as far north as Ross and Cromarty.¹⁷

There is another parallel which is worth considering: James Byres was one of the first Scots to identify as gay in a modern sense. A reading of the lives gathered in Ingamells' prosopography of the Grand Tour indicates the existence of a homosexual community in eighteenth century Rome and Florence, relatively discreet, but rarely troubled. Byres was a friend and colleague of the art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-68), who writes from an explicitly gay perspective, and may well have shared Etruscan research material with him. In the conversation piece of Byres with his household by Franciszek Smuglewicz (who made the sepia drawings for Byres's projected Etruscan volume) both Byres and his partner (in the modern sense) Christopher Norton (1738-99) are in the picture along with his parents and sister¹⁸. What is unmistakable is the subject of the large oval bas relief hanging on the wall behind the figures, it is Ganymede with the eagle drinking from the shallow dish in his hands, a clear declaration of an affinity. Byres' will (in the same manuscript collection in the National Library of Scotland as his notes on Etruscan history) makes the closeness of the relationship between Byres and Norton explicit. Christopher Norton is a major beneficiary, having been (a venerable expedient) married to one of Byres's cousins.

¹⁷ Cf. Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, *Dissertatio de monumentis quibusdam Romanis in Boreali Magnae Britanniae Parte* (Edinburgh, 1750). The classic account of the assertion of the *Romanitas* of Scotland, by Sibbald as well as Clerk is Stuart Piggott, *Ruins in a Landscape: essays in antiquarianism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976) especially pp.133-59. A recent over view of the subject is Peter Davidson and Daniel Maccannell, 'The 1707 Union, Europe and the Culture of Scotland', with Daniel Maccannell, in *Forging the State: European state formation and the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707*, ed. Andrew Mackillop and Micheál O Siochrú (Dundee: Dundee University Press, 2009), pp.175-191.

¹⁸ The portrait dates from c.1775-78. It is one of two versions, with variant backgrounds, this one Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, inv.no. PG2601

This leads us to a re-consideration of the two antiquarians shown drawing a pilaster-painting of a near-naked youth in a tomb in one of the earliest of the sequence of both Smuglewicz's sepias and Christopher Norton's engravings,¹⁹



While the figures may be scene-setting generic antiquaries, it is possible also to read them as Byres and Norton in the act of making their own records of the tombs, a gay couple making modern drawings of an ancient depiction of a naked youth. The *Hypogaei* drawings

¹⁹ The sepias are in the von Wagner museum, Würzburg; the engravings were finally published by Frank Howard in *Hypogaei, sepulchral caverns of Tarquinia, the Capital of Ancient Etruria* (London: the editor, c.1842)

reproduce many wall-paintings of naked male figures – the impression given by what survives of the project is of a discovery of a homosocial society delighting in homoerotic decorations.

I would advance the strong possibility that some of the research notes which governed the choice and sequence of illustrations for Byres' project (possibly made by Byres in the early 1760s when Piranesi was making the drawings for his own Etruscan plates, although the drawings by Smuglewicz may well have been made later) were made available to Johann Joachim Winckelmann when the latter was preparing his *History of Ancient Art* (1764). In this work he alludes to 'a later discovery' of Etruscan tomb-paintings than Buonarotti's with 'more important pictures': he goes on to list these, and they coincide almost exactly with the material drawn and engraved for Byres's Etruscan project, to the degree that it is possible to consider these pages of Winckelmann, with their emphasis on the male nude, as closely related to the dispersed fragments of the text of Byres's *Hypogaei*.²⁰

In summary, this note has argued that James Byres's thinking about the past, both in its fascination with origins and remotest antiquity and in a kind of analogical sympathy with the Etruscans (and disparagement of the Romans), conforms to strong patterns of Scottish historiography with its emphasis on the (wholly fictional) integrity of an ancient kingdom ruled by an unbroken line of kings. Further he shows signs of the kinds of analogical reading common in the Catholic and Jacobite communities, with a tendency to identify Lowland Scotland and England with the Romans (although sometimes, confusingly, the Stuarts and their adherents in the north were identified with the Trojans of the *Aeneid*) and the Etruscans by implication with the northern Stuart-loyalist Scots. So, in this implied identification, Byres

²⁰ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art* (Boston: Little Brown and Co, 1856), pp.357-9. It would be rash to claim that Byres is the only possible source of this information, but he remains a very likely source.

claims the Etruscans as ancestors. Given that he considered a number of what we now know to have been Greek vases to have been Etruscan, and that these vases frequently depicted the male nude, as did the homoerotic paintings in Etruscan tombs, he may also have been claiming the Etruscans as ancestors in a more imaginative and personal sense, by identifying them as a society inclusive of gay sensibility and practise.