



..... GUIDE TO
**ANCIENT
ETRUSCAN
ART**

Smarthistory guide to Ancient Etruscan art

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Smarthistory • Brooklyn



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Map



PART I

Etruscan art

1. The Etruscans, an introduction

Dr. Laurel Taylor



Tomb (of the Funeral Bed?), 470-60 B.C.E., found in the necropolis of Tarquinia (Villa Giulia, Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Before the small village of Rome became “Rome” with a capital “R” (to paraphrase D.H. Lawrence), a brilliant civilization once controlled almost the entire peninsula we now call Italy. This was the Etruscan civilization, a vanished culture whose achievements set the stage not only for the development of ancient Roman art and culture but for the Italian Renaissance as well.

Though you may not have heard of them, the Etruscans were the first “superpower” of the Western Mediterranean who, alongside the Greeks, developed the earliest true cities in Europe. They were so

successful, in fact, that the most important cities in modern Tuscany (Florence, Pisa, and Siena, to name a few) were first established by the Etruscans and have been continuously inhabited since then.

Yet the labels ‘mysterious’ or ‘enigmatic’ are often attached to the Etruscans since none of their own histories or literature survives. This is particularly ironic as it was the Etruscans who were responsible for teaching the Romans the alphabet and for spreading literacy throughout the Italian peninsula.

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Etruscan civilization, 750-500 B.C.E. (CC BY-SA 3.0), Norman Einstein – based on a map from The National Geographic Magazine Vol.173 No.6 (June 1988)

The influence on ancient Rome

Etruscan influence on ancient Roman culture was profound. It was from the Etruscans that the Romans inherited many of their own cultural and artistic traditions, from the spectacle of gladiatorial combat, to hydraulic engineering, temple design, and religious ritual, among many other things. In fact, hundreds of years after the Etruscans had been conquered by the Romans and absorbed into their empire, the Romans still maintained an Etruscan priesthood in Rome (which they thought necessary to consult when under attack from invading ‘barbarians’).

We even derive our very common word ‘person’ from the Etruscan mythological figure ‘Phersu’– the frightful, masked figure you see in this Early Etruscan tomb painting who would engage his victims in a dreadful ‘game’ of blood letting in order to appease the soul of the deceased (the original gladiatorial games, according to the Romans!).



Phersu and his victim, Tomb of the Augurs, late 6th century B.C.E., Tarquinia

Etruscan art and the afterlife

Early on the Etruscans developed a vibrant artistic and architectural culture, one that was often in dialogue with other Mediterranean civilizations. Trading of the many natural mineral resources found in Tuscany, the center of ancient Etruria, caused them to bump up against Greeks, Phoenicians and Egyptians in the Mediterranean. With these other Mediterranean cultures, they exchanged goods, ideas and, often, a shared artistic vocabulary.

Unlike with the Greeks, however, the majority of our knowledge about Etruscan art comes largely from their burials. (Since most Etruscan cities are still inhabited, they hide their Etruscan art and architecture under Roman, Medieval and Renaissance layers). Fortunately, though, the Etruscans cared very much about equipping their dead with everything necessary for the afterlife—from lively tomb paintings to sculpture to pottery that they could use in the next world.

From their extensive cemeteries, we can look at the “world of the dead” and begin to understand some about the “world of the living.” During the early phases of Etruscan civilization, they conceived of the afterlife in terms of life as they knew it. When someone died, he or she would be cremated and provided with another ‘home’ for the afterlife.



Etruscan hut urn (8th century B.C.E.), impasto (Walters Art Museum, CC0)

This type of hut urn (above), made of an unrefined clay known as impasto, would be used to house the cremated remains of the deceased. Not coincidentally, it shows us in miniature form what a typical Etruscan house would have looked like in Iron Age Etruria (900-750 B.C.E.)—oval with a timber roof and a smoke hole for an internal hearth.



Fibula from Regolini Galassi tomb in Cerveteri, gold, mid-seventh century B.C.E. (Vatican Museums)

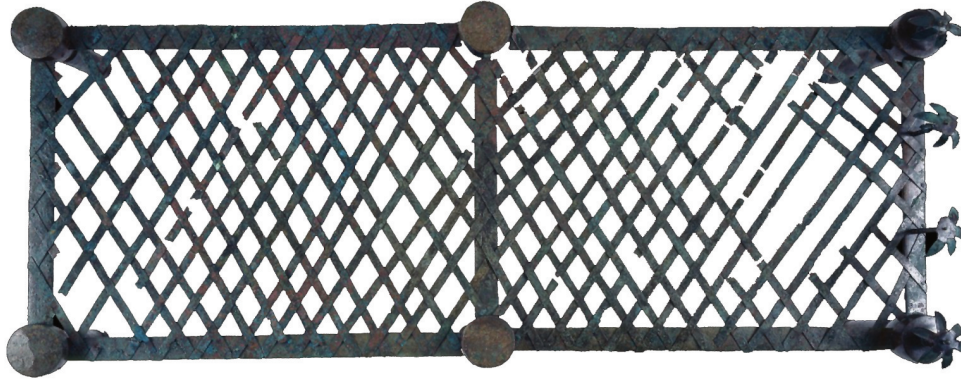
More opulent tombs

Later on, houses for the dead became much more elaborate. During the Orientalizing period (750-575 B.C.E.), when the Etruscans began to trade their natural resources with other Mediterranean cultures and became staggeringly wealthy as a result, their tombs became more and more opulent.

The well-known Regolini-Galassi tomb from the city of Cerveteri shows how this new wealth transformed the modest hut to an extravagant house for the dead. Built for a woman clearly of high rank, the massive stone tomb contains a long corridor with lateral, oval rooms leading to a main chamber.

A stroll through the Etruscan rooms in the Vatican museum where the tomb artifacts are now housed presents a mind-boggling view of the enormous wealth of the period.

Found near the woman were objects of various precious materials intended for personal adornment in the afterlife—a gold pectoral, gold bracelets, a gold brooch (or fibula) of outsized proportions, among other objects—as well as silver and bronze vessels and numerous other grave goods and furniture.



Funerary bed, antechamber, Regolini Galassi Tomb, Cerveteri, 675-650 B.C.E. bronze, 38 x 187 x 73 cm (Gregorian Etruscan Museum, The Vatican)

A bronze bed

Of course, this important woman might also need her four-wheeled bronze-sheathed carriage in the afterlife as well as an incense burner, jewelry of amber and ivory, and, touchingly, her bronze bed around which thirty-three figurines, all in various gestures of mourning, were arranged.

Though later periods in Etruscan history are not characterized by such wealth, the Etruscans were, nevertheless, extremely powerful and influential and left a lasting imprint on the city of Rome and other parts of Italy.

Additional resources:

Video: Etruscan Necropolises of Cerveteri and Tarquinia (from UNESCO/NHK) <[http://video:%20Etruscan%20Necropolises%20of%20Cerveteri%20and%20Tarquinia%20\(UNESCO/NHK\)>](http://video:%20Etruscan%20Necropolises%20of%20Cerveteri%20and%20Tarquinia%20(UNESCO/NHK)>)>

“Etruscan art” on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/etru/hd_etru.htm>

“In Our Time” podcast on Etruscan Civilization <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0151q7j>>

2. **Bucchero, a black, burnished ceramic ware**

Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker



Terracotta kantharos (vase), 7th century B.C.E., Etruscan, terracotta, 18.39 cm high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Bucchero, a distinctly black, burnished ceramic ware, is often considered the signature ceramic fabric of the Etruscans, an indigenous, pre-Roman people of the Italian peninsula. The term bucchero derives from the Spanish term *búcaro* (Portuguese: *pucaro*), meaning either a ceramic jar or a type of aromatic clay. The main period of bucchero production and use stretches from the seventh to the fifth centuries B.C.E. A tableware made mostly for elite consumption, bucchero pottery occupies a key position in our understanding of Etruscan material culture.

Manufacture

Bucchero's distinctive black color results from its manufacturing process. The pottery is fired in a reducing atmosphere, meaning the amount of oxygen in the kiln's firing chamber is restricted, resulting in the dark color. The oxygen-starved atmosphere of the kiln causes the iron oxide in the clay to give up its oxygen molecules, making the pottery darken in color. The fact that pottery was burnished (polished by rubbing) before firing creates the high, almost metallic, sheen. This lustrous, black finish is a hallmark of bucchero pottery. Another hallmark is the fine surface of the pottery, which results from the finely levigated (ground) clay used to make bucchero.



Terracotta column-krater (bowl for mixing wine and water), c. 560-500 B.C.E., Etruscan, terracotta, bucchero pesante, 16 1/8 in high, 13 9/16 in diameter (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Bucchero wares may draw their inspiration from metalware vessels, particularly those crafted of silver, that would have been used as elite tablewares. The design of early bucchero ware seems to evoke the lines and crispness of metallic vessels; additionally early decorative patterns that rely on incision and rouletting (roller-stamping) also evoke metalliform design tendencies.



Terracotta kyathos (single-handled cup), 7th century B.C.E., Late Villanova, terracotta, buccheroid impasto, 4 9/16 in high without handle, 8 11/16 in with handle, 11 in diameter of mouth (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Forerunners of Etruscan bucchero

Impasto (a rough unrefined clay) ceramics produced by the Villanovan culture (the earliest Iron Age culture of central and northern Italy) were forerunners of Etruscan bucchero forms. Also

called buccheroid impasto, they were the product of a kiln environment that allows for a preliminary phase of oxidation but then only a partial reduction, yielding a surface finish that ranges from dark brown to black, but with a section that remains fairly light in color. The kyathos in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (above) provides a good example; the quality of potting is high overall. This impasto ware was thrown on the wheel, has a highly burnished surface, but has a less refined fabric (material) than later examples of true bucchero.

Bucchero types

Archaeologists have discovered bucchero in Etruria and Latium (modern Tuscany and northern Lazio) in central Italy; it is often frequently found in funereal contexts. Bucchero was also exported, in some cases, as examples have been found in southern France, the Aegean, North Africa, and Egypt.



Terracotta trefoil oinochoe (jug), c. 625-600 B.C.E., Etruscan, terracotta, bucchero sottile, 11 3/16 in high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The production of bucchero is typically divided into three artistic phases. These are distinguishable on the basis of the quality and thickness of the fabric. The phases are: “thin-walled bucchero” (*bucchero sottile*), produced c. 675-626 B.C.E., “transitional,” produced c. 625-575 B.C.E., and “heavy bucchero” (*bucchero pesante*), produced from c. 575 to the beginning of the fifth century B.C.E.



Terracotta kantharos (drinking cup), c. 650-600 B.C.E., Etruscan, terracotta, bucchero sottile, 12 in high without handles, 10 1/4 in diameter (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The earliest bucchero has been discovered in tombs at Caere (just northwest of Rome). Its extremely thin-walled construction and sharp features echo metallic prototypes. Decoration on the earliest examples is usually in the form of geometric incision, including chevrons and other linear motifs (above). Roller stamp methods would later replace the incision.



Bucchero hydria (water ware jug), c. 550-500 B.C.E., Etruscan, terracotta, 60.5 cm high © The Trustees of the British Museum

By the sixth century B.C.E., a “heavy” type of the ceramic had replaced the thin-walled bucchero. A hydria (vessel used to carry water) in the British Museum (above) is another example of the “heavy” bucchero of the sixth century B.C.E. This vessel has a series of female appliqué heads as well as other ornamentation. A tendency of the “heavy” type also included the use of mold-made techniques to create relief decoration.



Terracotta vase in the shape of a cockerel, c. 650-600 B.C.E., Etruscan, terracotta, bucchero, 4 1/16 in high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

A number of surviving bucchero examples carry incised inscriptions. A bucchero vessel currently in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (above) provides an example of an abecedarium (the letters of the alphabet) inscribed on a ceramic vessel. This vase, in the form of a cockerel, dates to the second half of the seventh century B.C.E. has the 26 letters of the Etruscan alphabet inscribed around its belly (below)—the vase combines practicality (it may have been used as an inkwell) with a touch of whimsy. It demonstrates the penchant of Etruscan potters for incision and the plastic modeling of ceramic forms.



Alphabet (detail), Terracotta vase in the shape of a cockerel, c. 650-600 B.C.E., Etruscan, terracotta, bucchero, 4 1/16 in high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Interpretation

Bucchero pottery represents a key source of information about the Etruscan civilization. Used by elites at banquets, bucchero demonstrates the tendencies of elite consumption among the Etruscans. The elite display at the banqueting table helped to reinforce social rank and to allow elites to advertise the achievements and status of themselves and their families.

Additional Resources:

[Bucchero at the British Museum](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/research_publications_series/2007/etruscan_bucchero_ware.aspx) <https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/research_publications_series/2007/etruscan_bucchero_ware.aspx>

Jon M. Berkin, *The Orientalizing Bucchero from the Lower Building at Poggio Civitate (Murlo)* (Boston: Published for the Archaeological Institute of America by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2003).

Mauro Cristofani, *Le tombe da Monte Michele nel Museo archeologico di Firenze* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1969).

Richard DePuma, *Corpus vasorum antiquorum. [United States of America]. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu: Etruscan Impasto and Bucchero* (Corpus vasorum antiquorum., United States of America, fasc. 31: fascim. 6.) (Malibu: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1996).

Richard DePuma, *Etruscan Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013).

Nancy Hirschland-Ramage, "Studies in Early Etruscan Bucchero," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 38 (1970), pp. 1–61.

[Philip Perkins, *Etruscan Bucchero in the British Museum* \(London: The British Museum, 2007\).](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/research_publications_series/2007/etruscan_bucchero_ware.aspx) <http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/research_publications_series/2007/etruscan_bucchero_ware.aspx>

Tom Rasmussen, *Bucchero Pottery from Southern Etruria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Wim Regter, *Imitation and Creation: Development of Early Bucchero Design at Cerveteri in the Seventh Century B.C.* (Amsterdam: Allard Pierson Museum, 2003).

Margaret Wadsworth, "A Potter's Experience with the Method of Firing Bucchero," *Opuscula Romana* 14 (1983), pp. 65–68.

3. Temple of Minerva and the sculpture of Apollo (Veii)

Dr. Laurel Taylor



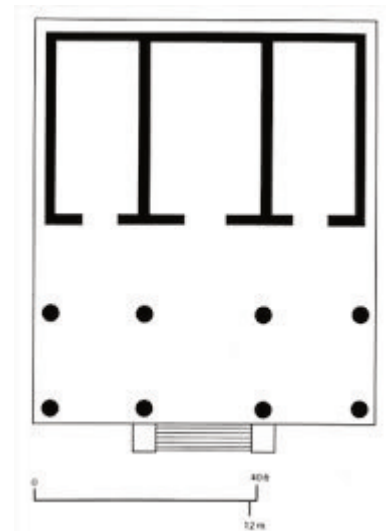
Among the early Etruscans, the worship of the gods and goddesses did not take place in or around monumental temples as it did in early Greece or in the ancient Near East, but rather, in nature. Early Etruscans created ritual spaces in groves and enclosures open to the sky with sacred boundaries carefully marked through ritual ceremony.

Around 600 B.C.E., however, the desire to create monumental structures for the gods spread throughout Etruria, most likely as a result of Greek influence. While the desire to create temples for the gods may have been inspired by contact with Greek culture, Etruscan religious architecture was markedly different in material and design. These colorful and ornate structures typically had stone foundations but their wood, mud-brick and terracotta superstructures suffered far more from exposure to the elements. Greek temples still survive today in parts of Greece and southern Italy since they were constructed of stone and marble but Etruscan temples were built with mostly ephemeral materials and have largely vanished.

How do we know what they looked like?

Despite the comparatively short-lived nature of Etruscan religious structures, Etruscan temple design had a huge impact on Renaissance architecture and one can see echoes of Etruscan, or ‘Tuscan,’ columns (doric columns with bases) in many buildings of the Renaissance and later in Italy. But if the temples weren’t around during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, how did Renaissance builders know what they looked like and, for that matter, how do we know what they looked like?

Fortunately, an ancient Roman architect by the name of Vitruvius wrote about Etruscan temples in his book *De architectura* in the late first century B.C.E. In his treatise on ancient architecture, Vitruvius described the key elements of Etruscan temples and it was his description that inspired Renaissance architects to return to the roots of Tuscan design and allows archaeologists and art historians today to recreate the appearance of these buildings.



Typical Etruscan temple plan

Archaeological evidence for the Temple of Minerva

The archaeological evidence that does remain from many Etruscan temples largely confirms Vitruvius’s description. One of the best explored and known of these is the Portonaccio Temple dedicated to the goddess Minerva (Roman=Minerva/Greek=Athena) at the city of Veii about 18 km north of Rome. The tufa-block foundations of the Portonaccio temple still remain and their nearly square footprint reflects Vitruvius’s description of a floor plan with proportions that are 5:6, just a bit deeper than wide.

The temple is also roughly divided into two parts—a deep front porch with widely-spaced Tuscan columns and a back portion divided into three separate rooms. Known as a triple cella, this three-room

configuration seems to reflect a divine triad associated with the temple, perhaps Menrva as well as Tinia (Jupiter/Jupiter) and Uni (Juno/Hera).

In addition to their internal organization and materials, what also made Etruscan temples noticeably distinct from Greek ones was a high podium and frontal entrance. Approaching the Parthenon with its low rising stepped entrance and encircling forest of columns would have been a very different experience from approaching an Etruscan temple high off the ground with a single, defined entrance.



Aplu (Apollo of Veii), from the roof of the Portonaccio Temple, Veii, Italy, c. 510-500 B.C.E., painted terra-cotta, 5 feet 11inches high (Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome)

Sculpture

Perhaps most interesting about the Portonaccio temple is the abundant terracotta sculpture that still remains, the volume and quality of which is without parallel in Etruria. In addition to many terracotta architectural elements (masks, antefixes, decorative details), a series of over life-size terracotta sculptures have also been discovered in association with the temple. Originally placed on the ridge of temple roof, these figures seem to be Etruscan assimilations of Greek gods, set up as a tableau to enact some mythic event.

Apollo of Veii

The most famous and well-preserved of these is the *Aplu (Apollo of Veii)*, a dynamic, striding masterpiece of large scale terracotta sculpture and likely a central figure in the rooftop narrative. His counterpart may have been the less well-preserved figure of Hercle (Hercules) with whom he struggled in an epic contest over the Golden Hind, an enormous deer sacred to Apollo's twin sister Artemis. Other figures discovered with these suggest an audience watching the action. Whatever the myth may have been, it was a completely Etruscan innovation to use sculpture in this way, placed at the peak of the temple roof—creating what must have been an impressive tableau against the backdrop of the sky.



Detail, Aplu (Apollo of Veii), from the roof of the Portonaccio Temple, Veii, Italy, c. 510-500 B.C.E., painted terra-cotta, 5 feet 11inches high (Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome)

An artist by the name of Vulca?

Since Etruscan art is almost entirely anonymous it is impossible to know who may have contributed to such innovative display strategies. We may, however, know the name of the artist associated with the workshop that produced the terracotta sculpture. Centuries after these pieces were created, the Roman writer Pliny recorded that in the late sixth century B.C.E., an Etruscan artist by the name of Vulca was summoned from Veii to Rome to decorate the most important temple there, the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. The technical knowledge required to produce terracotta sculpture at such a large scale was considerable and it may just have been the master sculptor Vulca whose skill at the Portonaccio temple earned him not only a prestigious commission in Rome but a place in the history books as well.

Additional Resources:

Etruscan art on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/etru/hd_etru.htm>

4. Apulu (Apollo of Veii)

A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia, Rome.



Model, Etruscan temple of the 6th century B.C.E. as described by Vitruvius (Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia, Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: The ancient Etruscans built temples that in some ways looked like Greek and Roman temples but are also distinct.

Beth: But when we look at them from the front, they certainly look like ancient Greek temples. But they're really different.

Steven: For one thing, the Etruscans did not use the Greek orders—that is Doric, or Ionic, or Corinthian. For another, they had very deep porches, and the temples tended to be more square.

Beth: And they're not made of stone the way ancient Greek temples were.

Steven: We're looking at the fragments of four large-scale terracotta figures from the temple at Veii, which was a principle city of the Etruscans. And we're seeing them in the Etruscan museum in Rome.

Beth: In ancient Greek architecture, we might expect to see figures like these occupying the pediment. But instead, these figures lined the rooftop.

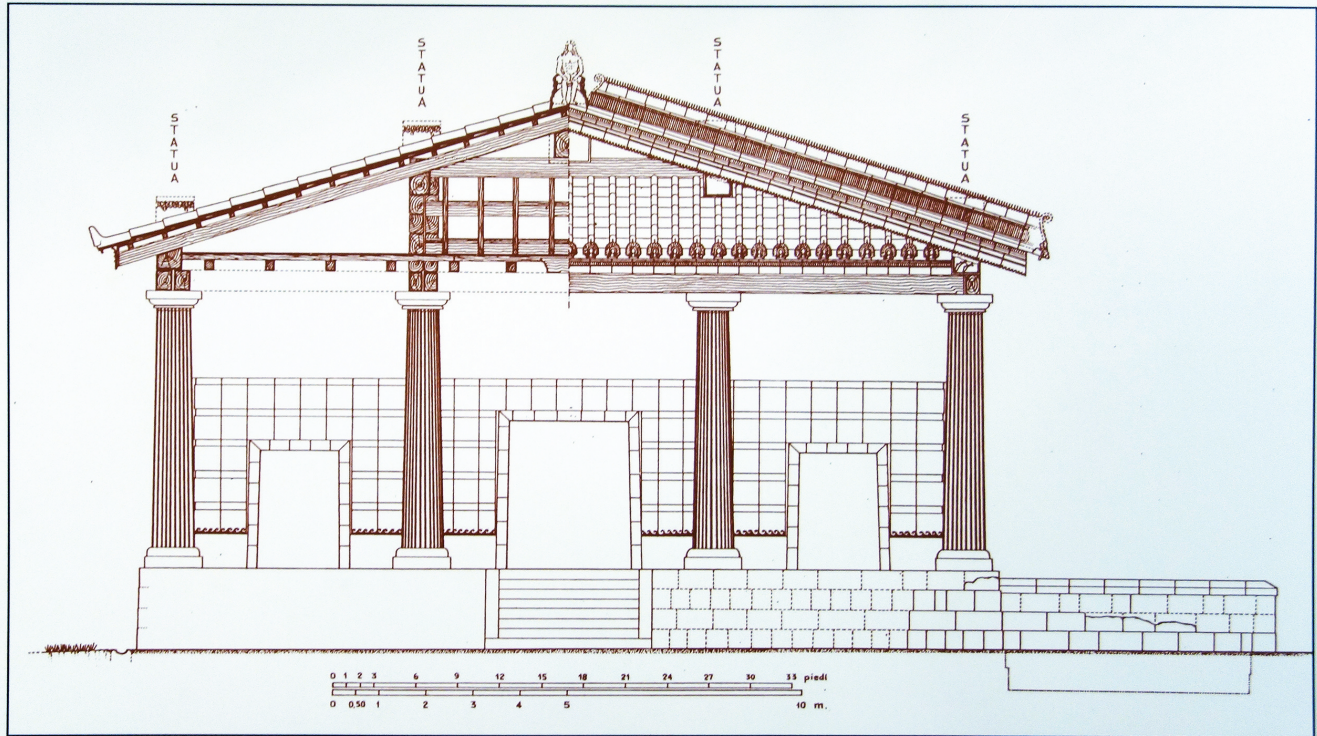
Steven: And like ancient Greek sculpture, they were very highly painted.



Hercle (Hercules) with the Golden Hind and Apulu (Apollo of Veil), from the roof of the Portonaccio Temple, Italy, c. 510-500 B.C.E., painted terracotta, 5' 11" high (Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia, Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: So it's such an interesting moment in Italy in the sixth century. We have Greek colonies in the south of Italy, we have the Romans in Rome although ruled by Etruscan kings, and then up in the northern part of Italy we have a confederacy of about a dozen Etruscan city states. So Italy is a complicated place in the sixth century B.C.E.

Steven: These are slightly larger than life. And although they were placed equidistantly, they do enact a specific scene.



Ricostruzione della facciata del tempio (G. Colonna G. Foglia)

Reconstruction of the Portonaccio Temple, showing the sculptures along the roofline (G. Colonna G. Foglia)



Map of Italy in the 6th century B.C.E.



Hercle (Hercules) with the Golden Hind from the roof of the Portonaccio temple, Italy, c. 510-500 B.C.E., painted terracotta, 5' 11" high (Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia, Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: This is a scene from ancient Greek mythology. It's the third labor of Hercules. Hercules is sent out to capture a very large deer with golden horns. Now, this deer is very special to the goddess Artemis. And actually the idea is that the person who sent Hercules on this labor wants to annoy Artemis.



Antonio Tempesta, Hercules and the Hind of Mount Cerynea, 1608, etching, 5 3/16 x 7 1/16 in (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Steven: So then she punishes Hercules. Now Hercules is known in the original Greek as Herakles. And he's shown here with the golden hind under him. He has been able to capture it, and now he's being confronted by both Artemis and her brother Apollo.

Beth: They want the deer back.

Steven: And so Hercules promises to release it once he shows it to the king, who sent him on this labor.

Beth: Something we find in Etruscan sculpture is this sense of movement and liveliness. We see that in the sarcophagus of the spouses, for example. And we see that here with the figure of Apollo, who is striding forward. And Hercules too, whose body is leaning forward and whose knee is raised. We see that sense of musculature and animation.



Aplu (Apollo of Veii) from the roof of the Portonaccio Temple, Veii, Italy, c. 510-500 B.C.E., painted terracotta, 5' 11" (Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia, Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: These are terracotta—that is, they're clay. So they would have been modeled in an additive process.

Beth: Apollo wears that "Archaic smile" that we're used to seeing from the kouros figures. But he's still very different than the Greek figures. His smile is a little bit more animated, his proportions of his body are different.



Aplu (Apollo of Veii) bust detail, from the roof of the Portonaccio Temple, Veii, Italy, c. 510-500 B.C.E., painted terra-cotta, 5' 11" high (Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia, Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: And the look on this face is not one that is looking out into a generalized space; he is catching the eye of Hercules. He is engaged directly, and therefore engages us.

Beth: And just like their faces are stylized, their bodies are also highly stylized. There's almost a sense of twisting at the hips and the shoulders are overly rounded and broad. This is not a naturalistic depiction of the body.

Steven: And the artist seems to favor detail. For instance, look at the way that the drapery falls flat, creating these lovely little loops. And look at the marvelous detail of the feet. This is such a tease, because here we have this engaging, lively sculpture from a culture whose literature has been lost, about whom we know so little.



Aplu (Apollo of Veii), bottom detail, from the roof of the Portonaccio Temple, Veii, Italy, c. 510-500 B.C.E., painted terra-cotta, 5' 11" high (Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia, Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/GLgrt_4WnMY>

5. Sarcophagus of the Spouses (Louvre)

Dr. Laurel Taylor



Sarcophagus of the Spouses, Etruscan, c. 520-510 B.C.E., painted terracotta (Musée du Louvre) (photo: Christina, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <<https://flic.kr/p/3Uvnhp>>

The freedom enjoyed by Etruscan women

One of the distinguishing features of Etruscan society, and one that caused much shock and horror to their Greek neighbors, was the relative freedom enjoyed by Etruscan women. Unlike women in ancient Greece or Rome, upper class Etruscan women actively participated in public life—attending banquets, riding in carriages and being spectators at (and participants in) public events. Reflections of such freedoms are found throughout Etruscan art; images of women

engaged in these activities appear frequently in painting and in sculpture.

The *Sarcophagus of the Spouses* was found in Cerveteri, a town in Italy north of Rome, which is the site of a large Etruscan necropolis (or cemetery), with hundreds of tombs. The sarcophagus vividly evokes both the social visibility of Etruscan women and a type of marital intimacy rarely seen in Greek art from this period.

A funerary banquet?

In the sarcophagus (and another largely identical example at the Villa Giulia in Rome), the two figures recline as equals as they participate in a banquet, possibly a funerary banquet for the dead. In contemporary Greece, the only women attending public banquets, or symposia, were courtesans, not wives! The affectionate gestures and tenderness between the Etruscan man and woman convey a strikingly different attitude about the status of women and their relative equality with their husbands.

Terracotta

Aside from its subject matter, the sarcophagus is also a remarkable example of Etruscan large-scale terracotta sculpture (terracotta is a type of ceramic also called earthenware). At nearly two meters long, the object demonstrates the rather accomplished feat of modeling clay figures at nearly life-size. Artists in the Etruscan cities of Cerveteri and Veii in particular preferred working with highly refined clay for large-scale sculpture as it provided a smooth surface for the application of paint and the inclusion of fine detail.

Handling such large forms, however, was not without complications; evidence of this can be seen in the cut that bisects the sarcophagus. Splitting the piece in two parts would have allowed the artist to more easily manipulate the pieces before and after firing. If you look closely, you can also see a distinct line separating the figures and the lid of the sarcophagus; this was another trick for creating these monumental pieces—modeling the figures separately and then placing them on top of their bed.



Sarcophagus of the Spouses (oblique view), Etruscan, c. 520-510 B.C.E., painted terracotta (Musée du Louvre)

Color

A really lovely characteristic of this sculpture is the preservation of so much color. In addition to colored garments and pillows, red laced boots, her black tresses and his blond ones, one can easily discern

the gender specific skin tones so typical in Etruscan art. The man's ochre flesh signifies his participation in a sun-drenched, external world, while the woman's pale cream skin points to a more interior, domestic one. Gendered color conventions were not exclusive to the Etruscans but have a long pedigree in ancient art. Though their skin and hair color may be different, both figures share similar facial features—archaic smiles (like the ones we see in ancient Greek archaic sculptures), almond shaped eyes, and highly arched eyebrows—all typical of Etruscan art.



Sarcophagus of the Spouses (profile detail), Etruscan, c. 520-510 B.C.E., painted terracotta (Musée du Louvre) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

What were they holding?

One of the great puzzles of the sarcophagus centers on what the figures were holding. Etruscan art often featured outsized, expressive hands with suggestively curled fingers. Here the arm positions of both figures hint that each must have held small objects, but what? Since the figures are reclining on a banquetting couch, the objects could have been vessels associated with drinking, perhaps wine cups, or representations of food. Another possibility is that they may have held alabastra, small vessels containing oil used for anointing the dead. Or, perhaps, they held all of the above—food, drink and oil, each a necessity for making the journey from this life to the next.

Whatever missing elements, the conviviality of the moment and intimacy of the figures capture the life-affirming quality often seen in Etruscan art of this period, even in the face of death.

Additional resources:

[The Sarcophagus in the Louvre](http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/sarcophagus-spouses) <<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/sarcophagus-spouses>>

[Etruscan Necropolises of Cerveteri and Tarquinia \(UNESCO\)](http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1158) <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1158>>

[Etruscan Art on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/etru/hd_etru.htm) <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/etru/hd_etru.htm>

[Conservation in Action: Etruscan Sarcophagi](http://www.mfa.org/collections/conservation/conservationinaction_etruscansarcophagi) <http://www.mfa.org/collections/conservation/conservationinaction_etruscansarcophagi>



Sarcophagus of the Spouses, Etruscan, c. 520-510 B.C.E., painted terracotta (Musée du Louvre) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

6. Sarcophagus of the Spouses (Rome)

Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker



Sarcophagus of the Spouses, c. 520 B.C.E., Etruscan, painted terracotta, 3 feet 9-1/2 inches x 6 feet 7 inches, found in the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri (Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia in Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The *Sarcophagus of the Spouses* is an anthropoid (human-shaped), painted terracotta sarcophagus found in the ancient Etruscan city of Caere (now Cerveteri, Italy). The sarcophagus, which would have originally contained cremated human remains, was discovered during the course of archaeological excavations in the Banditaccia necropolis of ancient Caere during the nineteenth century and is now in Rome. The sarcophagus is quite similar to another terracotta sarcophagus from Caere depicting a man and woman that is presently housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris; these two sarcophagi are contemporary

to one another and are perhaps the products of the same artistic workshop.

The sarcophagus depicts a reclining man and woman on its lid. The pair rests on highly stylized cushions, just as they would have done at an actual banquet. The body of the sarcophagus is styled so as to resemble a kline (dining couch). Both figures have highly stylized hair, in each case plaited with the stylized braids hanging rather stiffly at the sides of the neck. In the female's case, the plaits are arranged so as to hang down in front of each shoulder. The female wears a soft

cap atop her head; she also wears shoes with pointed toes that are characteristically Etruscan. The male's braids hang neatly at the back, played across the upper back and shoulders. The male's beard and the hair atop his head is quite abstracted without any interior detail. Both figures have elongated proportions that are at home in the archaic period in the Mediterranean.



Upper bodies (detail), Sarcophagus of the Spouses, c. 520 B.C.E., Etruscan, painted terracotta, found in the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri (Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia in Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Feet and shoes (detail), Sarcophagus of the Spouses, c. 520 B.C.E., Etruscan, painted terracotta, found in the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri (Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia in Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

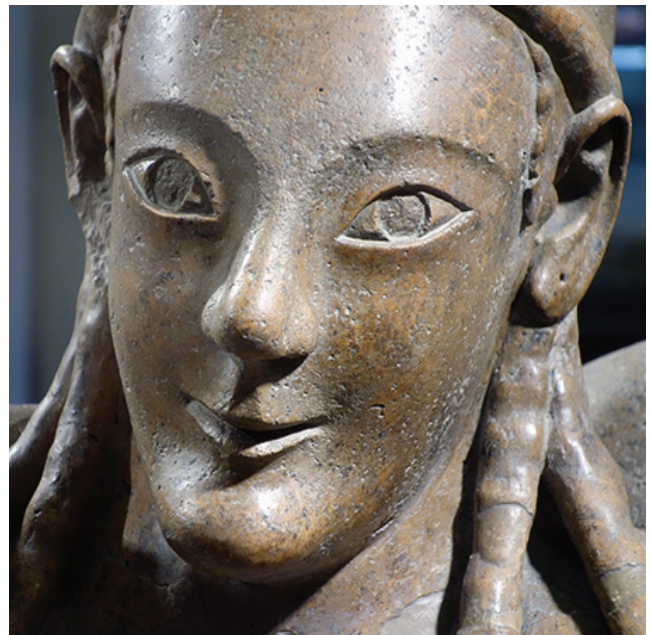
A banquet

The *Sarcophagus of the Spouses* has been interpreted as belonging to a banqueting scene, with the couple reclining together on a single dining couch while eating and drinking. This situates the inspiration for the sarcophagus squarely in the convivial (social) sphere and, as we are often reminded, conviviality was central to Etruscan mortuary rituals. Etruscan funerary art—including painted tombs—often depicts scenes of revelry, perhaps as a reminder of the funeral banquet that would send the deceased off to the afterlife or perhaps to reflect the notion of perpetual conviviality in said afterlife. Whatever the case, banquets provide a great deal of iconographic fodder for Etruscan artists.



Banquet Plaque (detail) from Poggio Civitate, early 6th century B.C.E., Etruscan, terracotta (Antiquarium di Poggio Civitate Museo Archeologico, Murlo, Italy) (photo: sailko, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lastra_di_rivestimento_fittile_con_scena_di_banchetto_murlo_antiquarium_di_poggio_civitate_VI_sec._ac..JPG> CC BY-SA 3.0)

In the case of the sarcophagus it is also important to note that at Etruscan banquets, men and women reclined and ate together, a circumstance that was quite different from other Mediterranean cultures, especially the Greeks. We see multiple instances of mixed gender banquets across a wide chronological range, leading us to conclude that this was common practice in Etruria. The terracotta plaque from Poggio Civitate, Murlo (above), for instance, that is roughly contemporary to the sarcophagus of the spouses shows a close iconographic parallel for this custom. This cultural custom generated some resentment—even animus—on the part of Greek and Latin authors in antiquity who saw this Etruscan practice not just as different, but took it as offensive behavior. Women enjoyed a different and more privileged status in Etruscan society than did their Greek and Roman counterparts.



Female's face (detail), Sarcophagus of the Spouses, c. 520 B.C.E., Etruscan, painted terracotta, found in the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri (Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia in Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Seated statue of Zeus from Poseidonia (Paestum) c. 530 B.C.E., terracotta (photo: Dave & Margie Hill, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paestum_Museum_%2861207_63666%29.jpg> CC BY-SA 2.0) (Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Paestum)

Technical achievement

The *Sarcophagus of the Spouses* is a masterwork of terracotta sculpture. Painted terracotta sculpture played a key role in the visual culture of archaic Etruria. Terracotta artwork was the standard for decorating the superstructure of Etruscan temples and the coroplastic (terracotta) workshops producing these sculptures often displayed a high level of technical achievement. This is due, in part, to the fact that ready sources of marble were unknown in archaic Italy. Even though contemporary Greeks produced masterworks in marble during the sixth century B.C.E., terracotta statuary such as this sarcophagus itself counts as a masterwork and would have been an elite commission. Contemporary Greek colonists in Italy also produced high-level terracotta statuary, as exemplified by the seated statue of Zeus from Poseidonia (later renamed Paestum) that dates c. 530 B.C.E.

Etruscan culture

In the case of the Caeretan sarcophagus, it is an especially challenging commission. Given its size, it would have been fired in multiple pieces. The composition of the reclining figures shows awareness of Mediterranean stylistic norms in that their physiognomy reflects an Ionian influence (Ionia was a region in present-day Turkey, that was a Greek colony)—the rounded, serene faces and the treatment of hairstyles would have fit in with contemporary Greek styles.

However, the posing of the figures, the angular joints of the limbs, and their extended fingers and toes reflect local practice in Etruria. In short, the artist and his workshop are aware of global trends while also catering to a local audience. While we cannot identify the original owner of the sarcophagus, it is clear that the person(s) commissioning it would have been a member of the Caeretan elite.



Male's face (detail), *Sarcophagus of the Spouses*, c. 520 B.C.E., Etruscan, painted terracotta, found in the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri (Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia in Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The *Sarcophagus of the Spouses* as an object conveys a great deal of information about Etruscan culture and its customs. The convivial theme of the sarcophagus reflects the funeral customs of Etruscan society and the elite nature of the object itself provides important information about the ways in which funerary custom could reinforce the identity and standing of aristocrats among the community of the living.

Additional resources:

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7. Sarcophagus of the Spouses (Rome)

A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Sarcophagus of the Spouses (or Sarcophagus with Reclining Couple), from the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri, Italy, c. 520 B.C.E., painted terracotta, 3' 9 1/2" x 6' 7" (Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome.

Steven: We're in the Etruscan Museum in Rome and we're looking at one of the most important objects ever found in an Etruscan tomb—and there were a lot of Etruscan tombs.

Beth: Well, this is the primary way we know about Etruscan culture. They left us no literature, no history. But we have a lot of their artwork, which is found in tombs, and a lot of those objects have inscriptions.

Steven: This is the Sarcophagus of the Spouses. There were two well

known versions of this: one is in Paris at the Louvre and the other is here in Rome. So this is a large ceramic container and the two figures are essentially a lid that can be lifted off.

Beth: The Etruscans occupied the area of northern Italy and it's an interesting time because at the same moment there are Romans who are occupying the city of Rome and south of that there are Greek colonies.

Steven: But the Romans were not yet Rome as we know it. They were just beginning and in fact they were ruled by Etruscan kings.

Beth: Right, and it wasn't until 509 that the Romans ousted the last Etruscan king. And this dates from slightly earlier than that.

Steven: So let's look at the couple.



Sarcophagus of the Spouses (detail of upper bodies), from the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri, Italy, c. 520 B.C.E., painted terracotta, 3' 9 1/2" x 6' 7" (Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Well, they're incredibly life-like, and this is surprising because when we think about ancient Greek sculpture from this time—we might think of the kouros figures—which are very stiff, where the limbs are very close to the body. And here immediately we notice the figures moving out into our space, extending their arms.

Steven: The figures represented in Archaic Greek art are also separate. You think of the male kouros figure or the female kore. Those are free-standing figures that stand alone and here we have two figures that embrace, that lie next to each other, where there's a tremendous sense of intimacy.

Beth: In ancient Greek culture there are no monumental tombs like the ones we find in Etruscan culture. There are similarities and there are differences between these two cultures that are closely communicating with one another.

Steven: One of the most important differences is that this is made in terracotta, that is this is clay. Whereas the Greeks preferred mostly marble, but increasingly would work in bronze. This would have been modeled as a complete object and then most likely, when it had begun to dry, what potters call the leather-hard stage, it's likely that the

artist would've burnished the object, that is smoothed it, with a hard surface to create a glossy sheen. Then it would have been cut in half, likely, because the object is so large, it might not have fit in the kiln. And so this would have been fired in four pieces: both the lid and the base, on both sides.

Beth: So we mentioned the way that the figures' arms are outstretched and the way the figures move into our space. Likely they were holding objects relating to a banquet. We see banqueting scenes often on the walls in frescoes in Etruscan tombs.

Steven: Or as some art historians have conjectured, it's possible that the woman was holding a perfume bottle. It's also possible that one of the figures was holding a pomegranate, which is a symbol of the eternal.

Beth: There is a sense of sociability here and it might remind us of scenes we see on Greek pottery, of figures at a banquet, the symposium... And when we see that in Greek pottery, those are male figures. But here we have a couple: he's got his arm around her. But we're not supposed to see these as portraits; this is not the way this man and women look. But instead, like the "Archaic smile," we have features that are stylized.



Male's face (detail), Sarcophagus of the Spouses, from the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri, Italy, c. 520 B.C.E., painted terracotta, 3' 9 1/2" x 6' 7" (Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: These are clearly not rendered from the observation of a model. So we have found literally thousands of Etruscan tombs.

Beth: This was found in a necropolis, that is a cemetery called Banditaccia, at Cerveteri, Italy.

Steven: This was one of the principle cities of the Etruscans.

Beth: It was found, broken into 400 pieces, and reassembled. And you can see when you look closely which pieces have been filled in by conservators and which pieces are original to the sculpture.

Steven: And if you look closely you can see the discs of the pupils are hollows and it's likely that something was originally inlaid there. It's really quite extraordinary how lucky we are to have such an intact object.

Watch the video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=252&v=XmirNCA_Lj4>

8. Tomb of the Triclinium, Tarquinia

Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker



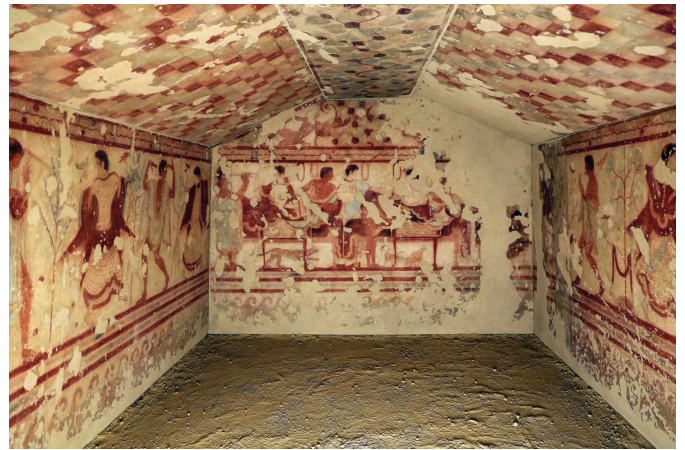
Etruscan civilization, 750-500 B.C.E. (image: NormanEinstein, CC BY-SA 3.0) Based on a map from *The National Geographic Magazine* vol.173 No.6 (June 1988).

Elaborate funerary rituals

Funerary contexts constitute the most abundant archaeological evidence for the Etruscan civilization. The elite members of Etruscan society participated in elaborate funerary rituals that varied and changed according to both geography and time.

The city of Tarquinia (known in antiquity as *Tarquinii* or *Tarch(u)na*), one of the most powerful and prominent Etruscan centers, is known for its painted chamber tombs. The Tomb of the Triclinium belongs to this group and its wall paintings reveal important information about not only Etruscan funeral culture but also about the society of the living.

An advanced Iron Age culture, the Etruscans amassed wealth based on Italy's natural resources (particularly metal and mineral ores) that they exchanged through medium- and long-range trade networks.



Tomb of the Triclinium, c. 470 B.C.E. (Etruscan chamber tomb, Tarquinia, Italy) (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0)

Tomb of the Triclinium

The *Tomb of the Triclinium* (Italian: *Tomba del Triclinio*) is the name given to an Etruscan chamber tomb dating c. 470 B.C.E. and located in the Monterozzi necropolis of Tarquinia, Italy. Chamber tombs are subterranean rock-cut chambers accessed by an approach way (dromos) in many cases. The tombs are intended to contain not only the remains of the deceased but also various grave goods or offerings deposited along with the deceased. The *Tomb of the Triclinium* is composed of a single chamber with wall decorations painted in fresco. Discovered in 1830, the tomb takes its name from the three-couch dining room of the ancient Greco-Roman Mediterranean, known as the triclinium.

A banquet

The rear wall of the tomb carries the main scene, one of banqueters enjoying a dinner party (above). It is possible to draw stylistic comparisons between this painted scene that includes figures reclining on dining couches (*klinai*) and the contemporary fifth

century B.C.E. attic pottery that the Etruscans imported from Greece. The original fresco is only partially preserved; although it is likely that there were originally three couches, each hosting a pair of reclining diners, one male and one female. Two attendants—one male, one female—attend to the needs of the diners. The diners are dressed in bright and sumptuous robes, befitting their presumed elite status. Beneath the couches, we can observe a large cat, as well as a large rooster and another bird.



Barbiton player on the left wall (detail), Tomb of the Triclinium, c. 470 B.C.E., Etruscan chamber tomb, Tarquinia, Italy (photo: The York Project)

Music and dancing

Scenes of dancers occupy the flanking left and right walls. The left wall scene contains four dancers—three female and one male—and a male musician playing the barbiton, an ancient stringed instrument similar to the lyre (left).

Common painterly conventions of gender typing are employed—the skin of females is light in color while male skin is tinted a darker tone of orange-brown. The dancers and musicians, together with the feasting, suggest the overall convivial tone of the Etruscan funeral. In keeping with ancient Mediterranean customs, funerals were often accompanied by games, as famously represented by the funeral games of the Trojan Anchises as described in book 5 of Vergil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*. In the *Tomb of the Triclinium*, we may have an allusion to games as the walls flanking the tomb's entrance bear scenes of youths dismounting horses, variously described as being either apobates (participants in an equestrian combat sport) or the Dioscuri (mythological twins).



Two dancers on the right wall (detail), Tomb of the Triclinium, c. 470 B.C.E., Etruscan chamber tomb, Tarquinia, Italy

The tomb's ceiling is painted in a checkered scheme of alternating colors, perhaps meant to evoke the temporary fabric tents that were erected near the tomb for the actual celebration of the funeral banquet.

The actual paintings were removed from the tomb in 1949 and are conserved in the Museo Nazionale in Tarquinia. As their state of preservation has deteriorated, watercolors made at the time of discovery have proven very important for the study of the tomb.

Interpretation

The convivial theme of the *Tomb of the Triclinium* might seem surprising in a funereal context, but it is important to note that the Etruscan funeral rites were not somber but festive, with the aim of sharing a final meal with the deceased as the latter transitioned to the afterlife. This ritual feasting served several purposes in social terms. At its most basic level the funeral banquet marked the transition of the deceased from the world of the living to that of the dead; the banquet that accompanied the burial marked this transition and ritually included the spirit of the deceased, as a portion of the meal, along with the appropriate dishes and utensils for eating and drinking, would then be deposited in the tomb. Another purpose of the funeral meal, games, and other activities was to reinforce the socio-economic position of the deceased person and his/her family: a way to remind the community of the living of the importance and standing of these people and thus tangibly reinforce their position in contemporary society. This would include, where appropriate, visual reminders of socio-political status, including indications of wealth and civic achievements, notably public offices held by the deceased.

Additional resources:

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9. The François Tomb, Vulci

Dr. Jaclyn Neel

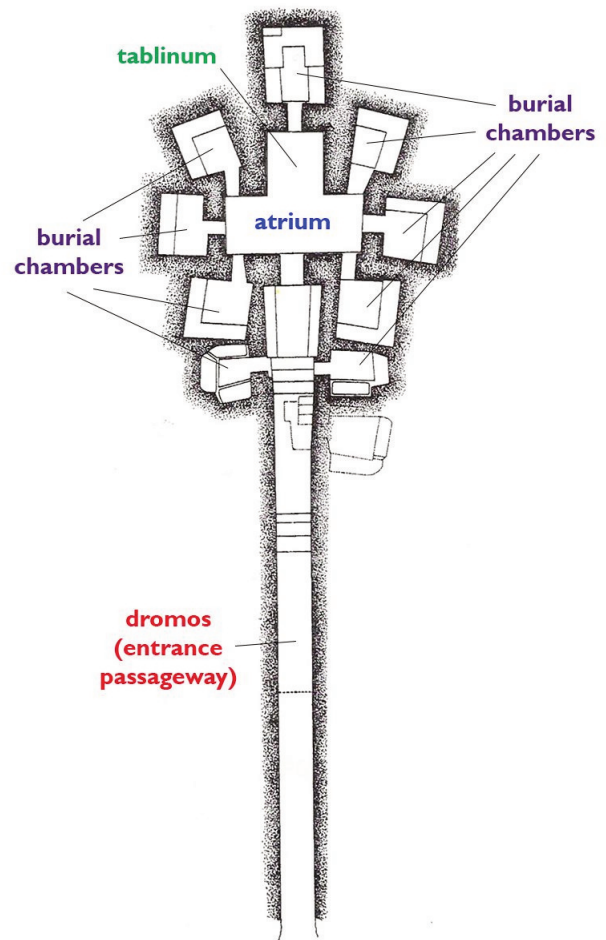
The François Tomb is chock-full of elaborate frescoes with complicated messages we may never fully understand.



The archeological site of the ancient Etruscan city of Vulci, Italy (photo: Robin Iversen Rønnlund, CC BY-SA 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vulci_site.jpg>

When Alessandro François and Adolphe Noël des Vergers entered the so-called François Tomb (named for its discoverer) in 1857, they described a magnificent treasure trove in which ancient Etruscan warriors were sleeping on their funeral couches, surrounded by grave goods, armaments, and brilliant tableaux on painted walls. This exceptional tomb from the Ponte Rotto necropolis (a large cemetery; the name stems from the Ancient Greek, literally meaning “city of the dead”) in Vulci served as a familial burial monument and was used for several centuries in the Hellenistic period. (The Hellenistic period begins with the death of Alexander in 323 B.C.E. and ends in 31 B.C.E. During this period, Greek rulers retained control over much of the eastern Mediterranean, Northern Africa, and the Middle East, disseminating Greek culture into these areas.)

The Etruscans believed that the afterlife mirrored their own world, so they provided elaborate “homes” for their dead. The ground plan of the François Tomb is essentially a T shape, with two main chambers (called the *atrium* and *tablinum* after the rooms of typical Italo-Roman houses). The main chambers are arranged perpendicularly, with small burial chambers branching out from all sides.



Plan of the François Tomb, Vulci

The François Tomb is famous largely because of the frescoes (paintings done on wet plaster; as the plaster dries, the paint bonds with the plaster, staining the surface and the plaster below) of its main chamber, which can be dated to the fourth century B.C.E. Unlike most Etruscan tomb paintings, the François tomb frescoes seem to include battle scenes — making it a rare, early example of ancient history painting.

Though scholars still have many questions surrounding the exact meanings of these paintings, they reflect important Etruscan ideas about history, and they would have helped reinforce shared narratives about ancestry and the past as family members continually visited the tomb to inter the newly deceased.

Dazzling frescoes

Frescoes fill the walls and ceiling of the tomb. (The original frescoes were removed by a collector in the nineteenth century, and replaced in the tomb itself by reproductions. The originals are now part of the Torlonia collection at the Villa Albani in Rome) The ceiling is designed to look like the interior of a building with a timber-framed roof structure, while the walls include various figural representations and geometric designs.



Frieze with Greek key pattern and hunting scene, atrium of the François Tomb, Vulci (Villa Albani, Rome)

The *atrium*, which was the first room a visitor would enter, has the most elaborate frescoes. At the upper margin of the wall, there is a small running frieze (a band of decoration that runs in a horizontal strip, typically at the upper margin of a wall) in two registers: a Greek key pattern on top, with a hunting scene below. (Here, the word register refers to a separate band of decoration that is directly above or below another band.) A key pattern, also called a meander, is made from a continuous line or pair of lines shaped into a geometric motif, usually featuring repeating series of right angles. Under the hunting scene are larger scenes featuring human figures depicted at nearly life size.

Although one wall was badly damaged, most of the figures are well-preserved and labeled with text. From this text we know that these figures include a mix of mythological characters (including Sisyphus, Eteocles and Polynices killing each other, and Ajax raping Cassandra) and historical figures, including the founder of the tomb, an Etruscan aristocrat named Vel Saties. This full-length portrait of Vel Saties wearing a *toga picta* (in Roman tradition, the *toga picta*, or painted toga, was a purple toga richly embroidered with gold; it was typically worn by victorious generals and other important figures) has garnered acclaim as the first such portrait in Western art. [1] It is likely that the lowest quarter of the wall was obscured by stone benches, although not all of these benches have been preserved.

Scenes from mythology and history

The *tablinum*, or rear room of the tomb, also has benches at the bottom, a fresco representing a running meander at the top, and a scene featuring human figures in between. There are a few differences in the iconography (symbols or types of representation that appear in art) that clearly separate the *atrium* and *tablinum*. First, the *tablinum* does not have a hunting scene below the meander; second, the ceiling patterns are different; and finally, the figural fresco is made up of two narrative scenes, each with labeled characters.



Portrait of Vel Saties, atrium of the François Tomb, Vulci (Villa Albani, Rome)

On the left-hand side of the tomb, there is a scene of Achilles sacrificing Trojan prisoners to the shade of Patroclus. In Greek mythology, Patroclus and Achilles were Greek warriors who fought an epic battle against the Trojans. When Patroclus was killed in battle, Achilles retrieved his body and refused to bury it until the shade, or ghost, of Patroclus appeared to him and demanded to be buried.



Achilles sacrificing Trojan prisoners to the shade of Patroclus, tablinum of the François Tomb, Vulci (Villa Albani, Rome)

The right-hand side of the tomb shows a battle between two groups of Etruscans. It is this battle scene that has drawn the majority of historical attention. The figures are arranged into a series of dueling pairs on the long wall. Inscriptions identify the men on both sides as Etruscan, but only the figures who appear to be losing are identified with a specific city. This discrepancy has led scholars to believe that the winners are from Vulci. Because many of the dying men are only partially clothed, this scene has been interpreted as a nocturnal ambush: surprised in their sleep, the defeated figures were apparently not able to fully dress before the fighting started.



Battle scene, tablinum of the François Tomb, Vulci (Villa Albani, Rome)

A link between text and image

Rounding the corner of the fresco is a scene derived from Rome's legendary history. Mastarna (perhaps an alternate name for Servius Tullius, the legendary sixth king of Rome) frees Caelius Vibenna, an Etruscan aristocrat who aided Rome's founder Romulus in his wars against Titus Tatius. (According to the Roman foundation myth, Titus Tatius was king of the neighboring Sabines. After the Romans abducted women from his kingdom, he waged a famous war on Romulus before reconciling and ruling jointly with him for five years until he was assassinated.) Although these two men are portrayed nude (in the manner of mythological figures) there is some evidence that both were considered historical figures.

These paintings represent an important potential link between ancient visual and textual sources. The Roman emperor Claudius claimed in a speech that Mastarna was the Etruscan name of Rome's sixth king, Servius Tullius, who was a friend of Caelius Vibenna (*ILS* 212). This is very similar to what is portrayed in the frescoes in the François tomb, and so the tomb's iconography seems to provide independent confirmation of Claudius' account.

Many scholars interpret the tomb's iconography as being pro-Etruscan and anti-Roman. Since the Roman state made substantial territorial conquests in Etruria during the fourth century B.C.E., when the tomb was founded, the deployment of the iconography of Caelius Vibenna and Mastarna could have been a symbol of cultural pride among the Etruscans.



Mastarna freeing Caelius Vibenna, tablinum of the François Tomb, Vulci (Villa Albani, Rome)

Unanswered questions

Despite widespread agreement about the fresco of Mastarna and Caelius Vibenna, questions remain about the meaning of many of the other frescoes in the François tomb.

The *atrium* fresco depicts Camillus, a Roman dictator known as the Second Founder of Rome, killing a figure identified as "Gaius Tarquinius of Rome."

While both Camillus and Tarquinius are figures from early Roman history, their presence in the painting is not clearly understood. The name Tarquinius may refer to either of two male Tarquin rulers (or Tarquinius) from early Roman history; however, their first names were not Gaius, but Lucius, and neither of these men was killed by Camillus. Both Tarquinius lived around the time of Mastarna in the sixth century B.C.E., whereas Roman authors believed that Camillus lived about a century later, around the turn of the fourth century B.C.E, closer in time to the date of the tomb's construction. To further complicate things, according to Roman tradition, Camillus was famous for defeating Etruscans. His presence in the tomb and his killing of Tarquinius are thus both mysterious.

Scholarly opinion is also divided on the relationship between the Camillus/Tarquinius fresco and the other historical fresco. Many scholars see them as part of the same narrative; others, however, argue that the two must be kept separate. This debate is unlikely to be resolved unless new evidence is discovered.



Camillus slaying Gaius Tarquinius, atrium of the François Tomb, Vulci (Villa Albani, Rome)

Mysteries remain

The François Tomb is rightly celebrated for its elaborate decor. Although we cannot fully understand the choices made by the tomb's patron, it seems likely that the frescoes were created to deliver a specific message. This message may have been political (pro-Etruscan/anti-Roman), religious (since most scenes focus on bloodshed), familial (portraying the family history of the owners), or ethical (illustrating moral qualities that were important to the owners). All of these interpretations have been suggested, and it is possible that all of them are correct—that is, that the owner of the tomb had all of these aspects in mind when choosing the iconography. It is the historical fresco, however, that has captured the most interest, as it seems to preserve rare information about Etruscan historical thought.

We may never know the answers to many of these questions, but the François Tomb remains a shining example of Etruscan fresco painting that offers us a glimpse into the tumultuous history of the ancient Mediterranean world.

[1] See Lisa C. Pieraccini, "Etruscan Wall Painting: Insights, Innovations, and Legacy" in Sinclair Bell and Alexandra A. Carpino, *A Companion to the Etruscans* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016), p. 256.

Additional resources:

The François Tomb at the Southern Etrurian Archaeological Heritage website (in Italian) <<http://www.etruriameridionale.beniculturali.it/index.php?it/193/la-tomba-francois>>

Image gallery of the frescoes <<http://www.repubblica.it/2009/06/sezioni/arte/gallerie/vulci-tomba/vulci-tomba/1.html>>

Vulci Park website with image gallery <http://comune.montaltodicastro.vt.it/i_servizi/34-gallerie-fotografiche/11-parco-di-vulci-i-dipinti-della-tomba-francois/>

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A. Sgubini Moretti (ed), *Eroi Etruschi e Miti Greci*. (Rome: Soprintendenza per i beni archeologici dell'Etruria meridionale, 2004).

10. Tomb of the Reliefs, Cerveteri

Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker



Tomb of the Reliefs, late 4th or early 3rd century B.C.E., Necropolis of Banditaccia (Cerveteri), Italy (photo: Roberto Ferrari, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The banquet is over, the dining equipment is stowed, and the warriors sleep on in this Etruscan dining room, yet the evocative signs of a lively scene draw the viewer into the ancient world. These evocations of an Etruscan banquet—from the cushions to the drinking equipment to the armor hung on pegs on the walls—are situated firmly in the funereal sphere, one that is replete with reminders not only of life but also of death. In tomb interiors we find some of our most important and compelling evidence for an understanding of the first millennium B.C.E. world of the Etruscans.

The *Tomb of the Reliefs* (Italian: *Tomba dei Rilievi*) is a late fourth-

or early third-century B.C.E. rock-cut tomb (*hypogeum*) located in the Banditaccia necropolis of the ancient Etruscan city-state of Caere (now Cerveteri) in Italy (a necropolis is a large, ancient cemetery). The tomb takes its name from a series of painted stucco reliefs that cover the walls and piers of the tomb chamber itself. Unlike some of its neighbors that are covered mounds of earth (tumulus-type tombs), the *Tomb of the Reliefs* is of the rock-cut type and was excavated at a considerable depth in the bedrock, approached by a steep dromos (entranceway). This elite tomb once accommodated several dozen burials and is located, likely not by accident, close to an important tumulus-type tomb from the earlier Orientalizing period.

Inside the tomb

The plan of the tomb is roughly quadrangular. The entire tomb and all of its features have been carved from the bedrock (a type of volcanic mudstone known as tufa). The central block of the room, supported by two piers, is flanked by a series of niches for burials that have been styled to resemble the dining couches (*klinai*) of the ancient world. Decorative pilasters with volute (scroll-shaped) capitals separate the niches one from the other (see image below).

The tomb's bas relief (low relief) decoration consists of carved bedrock features that have been stuccoed and painted. The decorative schema evokes the interior of an aristocratic house that is prepared to host a banquet or drinking party. The provisions for banqueters include cups and strainers hanging from pegs. The soldiers' armor—shields, helmets, greaves (protective armor for the lower leg)—has been stowed by hanging it from pegs. The pilasters are also decorated, with the items depicted including a range of tools and implements as well as the depiction of a small carnivore, perhaps a weasel.



Entrance (dromos), Tomb of the Reliefs, late 4th-early 3rd century B.C.E., Necropolis of Banditaccia (Cerveteri), Italy (photo: Sergio D'Afflitto, CC BY-SA 3.0)



Detail of central niche on rear wall, Tomb of the Reliefs, late 4th or early 3rd century B.C.E., Necropolis of Banditaccia (Cerveteri), Italy (photo, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Beneath the central niche of the rear wall we find an allusion to the afterlife. There, under the side table we find, in relief, the hellhound Cerberus and an anguiped (serpents for legs) demon—perhaps the Etruscan god Charun who conducted the souls of the departed to the afterlife? This central niche, equipped with footstool, may have been intended for the male and female heads of the family.

The Matunas family is identified as the owner by way of an inscribed cippus (a small pillar). The inscription reads “Vel Metunas, (son) of Laris, who this tomb built.” A locked strongbox included in the relief may be meant to represent the container for storing the records of the family's deeds (*res gestae*).

Interpretation

The *Tomb of the Reliefs* is unusual in the corpus of Etruscan tombs, both for its richness and for its decorative scheme. The Matunas family, among the elite of Caere, make a fairly strong statement, by means of funerary display, about their familial status and accomplishments, even at a time when the cultural autonomy of the Etruscans—and of Caere itself—had already begun to wane. The funeral banquet remains an important and vibrant theme for Etruscan funerary art throughout the course of the Etruscan civilization. This convivial and festive rendering demonstrates to us that the funeral banquet not only sent the deceased off to the afterlife but also reinforced ties and status reminders among the community of the living.

Additional resources:

Tomb of the Reliefs (from *Archaeological Heritage in Southern Etruria*) <<http://www.cerveteri.beniculturali.it/index.php?it/161/itinerari/5/6>>

Etruscan Tombs from the Toledo Museum of Art <<http://www.toledomuseum.org/kiosk/classic-court/etruscan/tombs-of-the-etruscans/>>

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- O. J. Brendel, *Etruscan Art*. 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995)
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11. The Chimera of Arezzo

Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker



Chimera of Arezzo, c. 400 B.C.E., bronze, 129 cm in length (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The *Chimera of Arezzo* is one of the best known pieces of Etruscan sculpture to survive from antiquity. Discovered near the Porta San Lorentino of Arezzo, Italy (ancient Arretium) in 1553, the statue was added to the collection of Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany in the sixteenth century and is currently housed in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Florence.

When the statue was discovered along with a collection of small bronzes, it was cleaned by Cosimo I and the artist Benvenuto Cellini; it was then displayed as part of the duke's collection in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. Giorgio Vasari (sixteenth-century artist, writer, and historian), studied the statue and declared it a bona fide antiquity.



Chimera from Arezzo, c. 400 B.C.E., bronze, 129 cm in length (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

What is a chimera?

The Chimera was a legendary, fire-breathing monster of Greek myth that hailed from Lycia (southwestern Asia Minor). The offspring of Typhon and Echidna, the Chimera ravaged the lands of Lycia until Bellerophon, a hero from Corinth, mounted on the winged horse Pegasus was able to slay it (Hesiod *Theogony* 319-25). Typically the Chimera is a hybrid—often shown with elements from more than one animal incorporated into the whole; most often these include a lion's head, with a goat rising from its back, and a snaky tail.

The *Chimera of Arezzo* presents a complex composition that seems conceived for viewing in the round. The contortions of the fire-breathing beast, obviously wounded in combat, evoke emotion and interest from the viewer. Its writhing body parts invite contemplation of the movement, pose, and musculature of the figure. While the tail was restored post-discovery, enough of the original composition confirms this dynamism. The lean body also emphasizes the tension in the arched back, the extended claws, and the roaring mouth set amidst the bristling mane.



Detail of back, Chimera from Arezzo, c. 400 B.C.E., bronze, 129 cm in length (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Firenze) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The right foreleg (below) bears a dedicatory inscription in the Etruscan language. The inscription reads, “tinšcvil” meaning “Offering belonging to Tinia” (*TLE* 663; Bonfante and Bonfante 2002, no. 26 p. 147). This indicates that the statue was a votive object, offered as a gift to the sky god Tinia.



Detail with inscription “tinšcvil”, Chimera from Arezzo, c. 400 B.C.E., bronze, 129 cm in length, (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Interpretation

The *Chimera of Arezzo* is a masterwork of Etruscan bronze working, demonstrating not only a high level of technical proficiency on the part of the artist (or workshop) that produced it but also clearly showing a fine-tuned awareness of the themes of Greek mythology that circulated around the Mediterranean. A. Maggiani discusses the wider Italiote context in which the statue was likely produced—pointing out iconographic comparisons from sites in Magna Graecia such as Metaponto and Kaulonia (Italiote refers to pre-Roman Greek speaking peoples of southern Italy, while Magna Graecia refer to the Greek colonies established in Southern Italy from the eighth century B.C.E. onward).



Detail with lion's head, Chimera from Arezzo, c. 400 B.C.E., bronze, 129 cm in length (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

These iconographic trends, indicative of increasing Attic (derived from the area around Athens, Greece) influence, suggests that the *Chimera of Arezzo* was produced by Italiote craftsmen who were influenced by the spread of Attic trends in art in the last years of the fifth century continuing through to the early fourth century B.C.E. The dedication of the statue as a votive offering to Tinia further reminds us of the wealth and sophistication of Etruscan elites who, in this case, could not only afford to commission the statue but could also afford to part with it in what may have been an ostentatious fashion.



Detail of back, Chimera from Arezzo, c. 400 B.C.E., bronze, 129 cm in length, (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Additional resources:

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C. M. Stibbe, "Bellerophon and the Chimaira on a Lakonian Cup by the Boreads Painter," in *Greek Vases in the J. Paul Getty Museum*, vol. 5, edited by M. True, pp. 5–12 (Occasional Papers on Antiquities, vol. 7) (Malibu: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1991).

J. M. Turfa, "Votive Offerings in Etruscan Religion," In *The Religion of the Etruscans*, edited by N.T. De Grummond and E. Simon, pp. 90–115 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).

Beth Cohen, "[Chimera of Arezzo](#)," *The American Journal of Archaeology*, July 2010 (114.3). <<http://www.ajaonline.org/online-review-museum/365>>

"[Chimera in Bronzo](#)," from the Ministero per i beni Culturali e Ambientali Soprintendenza Archeologica della Toscana Sezione Didattica (in Italian) <<http://www.archeologiatoscana.it/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/Chimera-dArezzo.pdf>>

12. Bronze Mars of Todi

Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker



Mars of Todi, late 5th or early 4th century B.C.E., hollow-cast bronze, 141 cm high (Gregorian Etruscan Museum, Vatican Museums) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The religious sanctuaries of ancient Italy were busy and multi-faceted places, playing roles not only in religion and ritual, but also in commerce and connectivity. People visited sanctuaries to participate in ritual, connect with their community, and to commune with the gods. The religions of ancient Italy relied heavily on votive practices—that is the giving of gifts or offerings to the divinities that helped to affirm a pact or agreement between the worshipper and a god or goddess. Votives could be humble objects from everyday life, or they could be purpose-made prestige objects. In all cases, votives are particularly instructive in informing us about ritual practice in the ancient world.

The statue

The so-called *Mars of Todi* is an inscribed Etruscan bronze statue dating to the late fifth or early fourth century B.C.E. It was discovered in 1835 on the slopes of Mount Santo near Todi, Italy (ancient *Tuder*). The hollow-cast bronze statue is the product of an Etruscan workshop but was likely produced for the market in Umbria (a region in central Italy).

The statue measures 141 cm in height, making it nearly life-sized. The Etruscans were adept metalworkers and Orvieto (Etruscan *Velzna*, Roman *Volsinii*) was particularly known for the production of bronze statues. The Romans reportedly removed 2,000 bronzes from Volsinii when they captured it in 265 B.C.E. (Pliny, *Natural History* 34.33). It is possible that the *Mars of Todi* was originally produced there.



Head (detail), *Mars of Todi*, end of the 5th century B.C.E., hollow-cast bronze, 141 cm high (Gregorian Etruscan Museum, Vatican Museums) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The warrior is clearly a prestige object, a worthy votive dedication. It is likely that the object was dedicated to Laran, the Etruscan god of war. Dressed in intricately worked plate armor, the figure takes a contrapposto stance and indicates that the Etruscan artist was aware of the formal elements of the Classical style of sculpture. These classicizing elements indicates that the artists of Etruria are not only aware of Mediterranean stylistic conventions but also that they are comfortable enough with these stylistic trends that they can in turn adapt and apply them to local tastes and demand. Likely attached elements—including a patera (a libation bowl) held in the right hand and a spear in the left—have not survived, nor has the helmet that he wore atop his head.

The inscription



Caption (detail), *Mars of Todi*, end of the 5th century B.C.E., hollow-cast bronze, 141 cm high (Gregorian Etruscan Museum, Vatican Museums)

The bronze statue bears an inscription in the Umbrian language that has been written using Etruscan characters. This dedication is inscribed on the skirt that is attached to the breastplate and reads “*Ahal Trutitis dunum dede*” (“Ahal Trutitis gave [this as a] gift”). The dedicant—Ahal Trutitis—has a name that is Celtic in origin, which lends this dedication of an Etruscan object in an Umbrian sanctuary a particularly cosmopolitan element.

Interpretation

The *Mars of Todi* is a rare object in that many prestige votives of its stature have not survived from antiquity. The careful burial of this object—perhaps after it had been struck by lightning*—accounts for its survival. The composition represents the tradition of libations made by soldiers prior to battle, an opportunity for beseeching the gods for support and success in battle. The dedication of this object is also indicative of the dynamic human landscape of ancient Italy—within that human landscape sanctuaries often served as nodal points where diverse cultures came into contact with one another. This votive statue, then, tells us a great deal not only about ritual practice and iconography, but also about those who frequented sanctuaries in ancient Italy.

*Note on lightning as sacred:

In ancient Italic religion lightning was sacred, as it was connected to the chief sky god, called Iuppiter (Jupiter) by the Romans and Tinia by the Etruscans. Thus on occasions when lightning struck the Earth, the spot which—or the object which—the lightning “selected” (*fulgur conditum*) would become even more sacred. Roman ritual doctrine considered these consecrated spots special and thus they were often marked in some way. The Puteal Libonis (also known as Puteal Scribonianum) in the Comitium of the Forum Romanum provides such an example; after a spot in the Comitium had been struck by lightning, it was marked with a puteal (a marble wellhead) (Festus 333). The Romans considered these special shrines, which often had a circular templum (a sacred, inaugurated precinct), as bidentalia (from the Latin noun *bidental*, *bidentalis* “a place struck by lightning”) and it was forbidden to tread on them. In the case of the Mars of Todi, the statue was found carefully buried in a stone-lined cist, leading to the conclusion that the statue had been struck by lightning, which caused it to fall from its podium and that it was subsequently ritually buried. The ritual burial of votive objects is a common practice in ancient Mediterranean religions, but the treatment of these bidentalia was special in its own right.

Additional resources:

[This sculpture in the Gregorio Etruscan Museum \(Vatican Museums\)](http://mv.vatican.va/3_EN/pages/x-Select/20select/20select_17.html) <http://mv.vatican.va/3_EN/pages/x-Select/20select/20select_17.html>

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13. Aule Metele (Arringatore)

Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker



Aule Metele (Arringatore), from Cortona, Italy, early 1st century B.C.E., bronze, 67 inches high (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence), (image: [corneliagraco](#), CC BY 2.0)

The image, status, and stature of the magistrate in the course of performing the duties of his office commands respect—and no pose is more riveting than that of the orator.

L'Arringatore ("The Orator") is a hollow-cast bronze statue that was recovered from Lake Trasimeno in 1566. The statue is an important example of bronze sculpture in later first millennium B.C.E. Italy and indicates the gradual Romanization of Etruscan art.

The statue

The life-size statue depicts a draped adult male, standing with his right arm outstretched. The figure adopts a frontal pose with a slight contrapposto stance (contrapposto refers to the figure shifting his weight onto his right leg). Based on the inscription on the statue, the figure is identified as Aulus Metellus (or Aule Metele in Etruscan). He is clearly a magistrate and his posture seems to be that of the orator who is in the process of addressing the crowd. He wears a tunic over which is draped a toga—the formal attire of the magistrate. The toga is wrapped around the body, leaving the right arm free. On his feet are the high boots that were commonly worn by Roman senators. His expression and slightly opened mouth make him a compelling figure. The statue was originally erected by the community in honor of Aulus Metellus.

The inscription



Inscription (detail), Aule Metele (Arringatore), from Cortona, Italy, early 1st century B.C.E., bronze, 67 inches high (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence) (image: [corneliagraco](#), CC BY 2.0)

The lower hem of the short toga carries an Etruscan inscription: "auleši meteliš ve[luš] vesial clenši / cen flereš tece sanšl tenine / tu θineš χisvlicš" which can be interpreted as reading, "To (or from) Auli Meteli, the son of Vel and Vesi, Tenine (?) set up this statue as a votive offering to Sans, by deliberation of the people" (TLE 651; CIE 4196).

Interpretation

The statue of Aulus Metellus offers us a glimpse of the changing socio-political landscape of the Italian peninsula during the latter first millennium B.C.E.—a period in which sweeping change brought on by the hegemonic fortunes of Rome and its booming population, signalled profound and lasting change for other Italic peoples, including the Etruscans. As Rome's territory expanded during the fifth through first centuries B.C.E., her neighbors were gradually absorbed into the sphere of Roman cultural, economic, and political influence. Some groups, of course, resisted in one way or another, while others gladly “joined up” through political and military treaties and through adopting a Roman lifestyle. This process of acculturation—or Romanization, to use a term that is considered outmoded by some scholars—means that cultural heterogeneity becomes less visible in the archaeological record, replaced instead by a more homogeneous cultural model. These were the fortunes of the Etruscans—as the autonomy of the various Etruscan states eroded, the Etruscans themselves elected to adopt the trappings of a Roman culture that was, in turn, indicative of wider, pan-Mediterranean dynamics. Etruscan art, politics, and even language gradually slipped away.

Thus *L'Arringatore* is one of our latest surviving examples of a sculptural masterwork that still demonstrates the traits of an Etruscan workshop, all the while packaged for an increasingly Roman world. The statue clearly wears the short *toga exigua* (a kind of narrow toga) and senatorial boots that come from the Roman sphere. He is posed as an orator—highlighting his political career as both Etruscan and Roman aristocrats did. His haircut is in keeping with those of Roman aristocrats and his face may betray some evidence of the *verism* (truthfulness) popular among Roman elites of the late Republic. The statue still carries an inscription in Etruscan, though, and the working of the bronze is in keeping with the tendencies of Etruscan craftsmanship. Surely the historical Aulus Metellus witnessed a world

that was changing rapidly and this statue that carries his inscribed name still bears silent witness to the patterns and dynamics of socio-cultural change in the Roman Mediterranean.

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Acknowledgements

Book cover design by Susan Zucker.

Special thanks Dr. Joseph Ugoretz for continuing to be our guide in academic technology and strategy, to Susan Zucker for shaping Smarthistory's design, and to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.