

Demons of Death

Tomba Dei Due Tetti: A Case Study

Introduction

The Etruscans were based in Italy in modern-day Tuscany, at a time when Rome was just developing. Ultimately, they were absorbed into the Roman Empire, but they left remains of their unique culture mainly in the form of tombs with their famous wall paintings. One of the necropoleis (graveyards) discovered was at Tarquinia, where approximately 2000 tombs are situated. Only about 200 of these tombs have wall paintings, indicating the exclusivity of these decorations and the status behind them. This poster analyses one of these tombs with its accompanying painting: the Tomba Dei Due Tetti. This tomb dates from the second half of the 3rd century BC and reveals Etruscan beliefs about the Underworld, as well as raising debate about the extent of Greek influence on Etruscan culture. I aim to present not only aspects of the Etruscan religion, but also to demonstrate that they had a strong and thriving culture that was not overshadowed by Greek influence. The Etruscans are often presented as a mysterious people. Of course, when compared to the Greeks and Romans we do not know as much about them, primarily because we do not have a comprehensive literary corpus. Most of our evidence stems from archaeology, which presents problems in itself as the evidence is subject to conjecture. All knowledge must be viewed with a degree of uncertainty, but that is not to say we know nothing at all about the Etruscans. They are far less mysterious than popular opinion believes.



Tomba Dei Due Tetti wall painting

The Painting

The wall painting is situated on the right wall of the tomb above a grave cut out of the rock. It depicts the moment when the newly deceased are escorted to the Underworld by demons and are met by late members of their family. It is quite a poignant scene, with the newly dead, a woman and a child, reaching their hands out towards their lost family. The style of the painting itself is quite Etruscan; the figures are painted with bold, thick lines in dark colours and the typical almond-shaped eyes of Etruscan art are just about visible.

The procession is flanked by two Etruscan demons, Charu on the left and Vanth on the right. Charu is an ugly, blue-coloured demon, an image stemming from the late archaic period where scenes of the Underworld became more frightening and intimidating. He is dressed in a short chiton and holds a hammer, his most recognisable symbol. Lounging in front of the door to the Underworld, he is fulfilling his role as the guardian of the afterlife. Vanth on the far right appears to be escorting the newly deceased to the Underworld. She too is dressed in a short chiton and holds a torch; there is a purposeful contrast between her human-like appearance and pretty face against Charu's demonic exterior. She places a hand on the deceased's shoulder. This is quite an ambiguous gesture that could be construed as threatening or comforting. Their very nature as other-worldly beings suggests they are threats to humans. Vanth could be forcing the woman and child towards the Netherworld, ensuring they do not escape. Charu's hammer is distinctly a weapon and adds a tone of violence to the scene. However, their postures are far more relaxed than this interpretation allows. Vanth is a guide, her torch as a beacon of light the dead can follow in this confusing environment, whilst Charu is leaning against a rock with his hammer on the ground in a very unthreatening manner.

The rock and the door that Charu is leaning on are the symbols that indicate this is a journey to the Underworld. Rocks are also used as an indicator of the afterlife in Homer's *Odyssey* and the door acts as a *locus medius*, an entrance to another world. The characteristic single rows of three bosses displayed on the door most likely imitate reality and are a recurring feature in Etruscan tomb paintings. This scene reveals unique Etruscan beliefs about the journey after death, where souls were escorted by demons, yet were received by the familiarity of their families.

A Strong Etruscan Culture



Greek lekythos depicting Charon

Greek influence on Etruscan culture is undeniable due to the amount of Greek pottery recovered from Etruscan tombs. This has often led to the opinion that the Etruscans borrowed their mythology and beliefs from the Greek, changing the names of deities to fit into their language. However, there is also evidence of a strong and unique Etruscan culture thriving. The figure of Charu in the tomb painting can be immediately compared to the Greek mythological figure Charon, both in the similarity of name and their role as a guide in the Underworld. But there are distinct differences between these two figures that indicate Greek influence did not submerge Etruscan tradition. The Greek lekythos dating from 500 to 401 BC Athens in the Ashmolean depicts Charon the ferryman. He is very human-like and benevolent, reaching out to the fluttering soul before him. He is also distinctly shown as a ferryman on his boat. The Etruscan Charu is never associated with water and is far more animalistic and disfigured, offering a more terrifying image of the Underworld. Charu is often divided into multiple beings, as seen in the Tomba dei Caronti also at Tarquinia, where the names Charun Huths, Charun Chunchules and possibly Charun Lufe can be read on the walls.

There is no counterpart for Vanth in the Greek pantheon at all, although Etruscan demons have sometimes been tenuously likened to the Greek furies in their role as demons of the Underworld. The votive figure of Vanth from 350 to 325 BC Etruria in the British Museum indicates that she was an important part of Etruscan culture. Here, she is wearing a longer chiton with her distinctive wings sprouting from her back. Two snakes twist around her arm, a symbol often used to characterize her like the torch. She is often seen as a generic guide to the Underworld, but her role may be more nuanced than that. It has been argued that the personification of Vanth only acts as a guide to the entrance of the Underworld, rather than along the entire journey. The different incarnations of Charu are mirrored in Vanth, as the personification of Vanth-Culsu appears to have a slightly different role, where she remains static at the door of the Underworld. These ambiguous incarnations and disfigured demons set Etruscan mythology apart from the Greek. Connections between the two are nominal at best; when analysed further, an independent Etruscan culture emerges.



Votive statue of Vanth

The Context of the Tomb

Etruscan burial rituals had been centred around various styles of rock tombs for centuries. The earliest tombs from the 7th to the 5th centuries were tumulus tombs, leaving large round monument above ground and often with a chamber below ground. Rock tomb architecture resurged in the 6th century, where tombs were typically cut into steep cliffs or hills. These tombs are quite unusual in Italy, but have been found in other Mediterranean cultures, indicating the Etruscans frequently interacted with other societies at this point. The Hellenistic style, which was the predecessor to the Tomba Dei Due Tetti, were the barrel-vaulted tombs built from stone blocks without any mortar, whilst in Tarquinia they were often based on the style of Etruscan houses. The Tomba Dei Due Tetti itself consists of a single room underground with a flat ceiling, a central pillar and graves cut into stone benches. One of the graves is directly in front of the wall painting. Rock-cut grave beds such as this originated in the 7th and early 6th centuries. However, there is also some evidence for the use of wooden sarcophagi in Etruscan tombs. From the 6th to the 4th centuries, rectangular cavities have been found in the floors of tombs where the legs of a wooden sarcophagus may have rested. These sarcophagi appear to mimic chests used in everyday life. The holes cut into the ground for the legs allowed for a stronger structural base for the wooden coffin, as the environment of the tomb decomposed the wood quickly. It is also possible that these sarcophagi evolved to be designed without any legs, and may have been placed in rock-cut graves such as this one, but any evidence for this will have decomposed. Many Etruscan designs for tombs mirror practices in daily life, perhaps to ensure the same standard of living for the dead in the afterlife.

The Etruscan Pantheon

Etruscan religion is one of the strongest areas of Etruscan study, due to the survival of texts by Martianus Capella, writing in the 5th century CE about the Roman liberal arts, and the discovery of the Bronze Liver of Piacenza. There are various incarnations of Vanth and Charu, suggesting a distinct vagueness surrounding Etruscan deities in terms of their numbers, attributes, sex and appearance. This lack of standardization is a contrast to contemporary cultures of the time, particularly the defining features of Greek mythology.

The Etruscans were well-known for the art of haruspexy; reading entrails, bird flight paths, lightning, etc.

The Bronze Liver of Piacenza, dating to the late 2nd century BC was used as a teaching tool for students so they could learn what marks on certain areas of the liver meant. The engravings on the liver divide the heavens into 16 parts, notably more than the later Roman belief of a four-part heaven. The gods dwell in a particular region of the sky, revealing why Etruscan temples face different directions, unlike Greek ones. In order for surviving constructions of the Etruscan heaven in Martianus Capella and on the liver to match up, it has been argued that the gods in each region changed with the seasons. Using the positions of the sunrise and sunset on the solstices and equinoxes, the Etruscan heaven moved two regions per season, moving both clockwise and counterclockwise throughout the year. This would also explain why Etruscan temples dedicated to one god also have inscriptions for several others. The *janitores terrestres*, the doorkeepers of the earth, including Vanth and Charu, appear to belong to region 16 along with the other Underworld gods. Whilst there are similarities between Etruscan religion and Mediterranean cultures, such as the belief in polytheism and the practice of animal sacrifice, the Etruscan division of the heavens in 16 parts reveals their religious beliefs were separate to other cultures.



Bronze Liver of Piacenza

Image accessed at: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Etruscan-bronze-model-of-the-liver-ca-second-first-century-BC-Musei-Civici-di-Fig1_51457163

Conclusion

Intrinsic Etruscan beliefs come through in this painting, both from the incarnations of the two demons and the continuation of the souls' journey in the afterlife. A comprehensive and unique religion acts as the backdrop to this scene; the 16-part heaven and complex changing of the seasons mirrors the flexibility of the deities and the fluid roles as guardians and guides for specific incarnations. The depiction of the family and the graves themselves reveal a snapshot of daily life, construed from the use of chests as sarcophagi, and the stylistic nature of the painting reaffirms the thriving Etruscan culture present in the scene. Similarities can easily be drawn between the Greeks and the Etruscans but the prevalence of Greek artefacts should not overshadow the importance and existence of the separate society that is clearly present in this tomb. The painting remains as a very moving and affirming scene of life after death, where, amongst uncertainty and divine characters, the comforting familiarity of reuniting with loved ones creates a sense of hope surrounding the unknown afterlife.

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