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A Glimpse into the Lost World

During the early Iron Age, central Italy prospered in hunting and agriculture while also hosting a land abundant in copper and iron; thus, led into an increase in population and urbanization which molded the maturity of the Etruscan culture. From c. 1000 to 750 BCE, the Villanovan culture were discovered to cover a wide area in central Italy during the Iron Age. Though they are no different from the Etruscan civilization, they are seen to be the precursor of the Etruscans. With the rise of the population of the Villanovan culture, villages began to be developed around Tarquinia, Veii, Cerveteri and Vulci that eventually become important Etruscan towns. Because of the archaeological finds, Etruscan cemeteries and tombs served as a glimpse into their culture and inspiration from surrounding areas. Though the Etruscans were seen to be the main inspiration for the Romans, Etruscan tombs showcase the implementation of Greek and Egyptian stylization into something so sacred and intimate.

From the eighth and third century BCE, the Etruscans had flourished in central Italy. Along with their many accomplishments and inventions, their decoratively painted tombs are one of their greatest achievements left behind. Most of the pigments used for painting were local—white came from chalk, green from malachite, red from ochre, yellow from iron oxides and black

usually from a mix of vegetables.¹ The colorful scenes depict settings of mythological figures interacting with the Etruscan daily life. Though these tombs depict magnificent paintings, these were intimate sacred areas were only seen during burial ceremonies or when another family member was laid to rest. The Etruscan tomb paintings demonstrate the beliefs and values the people had; they were proof of their belief in the afterlife but also the importance of grave goods for deceased.² Regardless of the paintings being displayed in a tomb, the paintings were not focused on the ceremony of burial or death, instead, they concentrated on the celebration of living³. One of the most common subjects were musicians playing their instruments while others feast on exotic foods. Nevertheless, the elaborative walls depict the figures to be one dimensional. It was not until the influence from the Greeks style of chiaroscuro that they started to add shadow to depict depth.⁴ With this new technique, they were able to add naturalistic elements onto their lively scenes of every day practices to outdoor banquets and mythology.

The scenes that were painted in the tombs highlight the importance the Etruscans had of their social status. The tombs at Tarquinia housed some of the earliest tombs that were rich in artifacts and decorative ornaments that covered the walls. Like the adaptation of using chiaroscuro to portray depth, the Etruscans had also gathered influence from the Greek culture and art. In the Tomb of the Blue Demons, 420-400 BCE (Figure 1), depicts a heavily influenced Greek idea of the underworld through the Etruscans understanding. On a wall is covered by

¹ Mark Cartwright, *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, "Etruscan Tomb Paintings", (Feb. 8, 2017), <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1013/etruscan-tomb-paintings/>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Frederik Poulsen, *Etruscan Tomb Paintings*, (Рипол Классик, 1922), 5-6.

black and blue-skinned demons, of which hold two snakes, who await their reunification in the afterlife of the deceased.⁵ In another tomb at Vulci, the atrium of the tomb has two main scenes, both of which are gathered from the Greeks. One scene is the Theban myth and the other of Homer's *Iliad*⁶. It depicts mythological figures interacting with Trojan prisoners during the funeral of Achilles' Patroclus. Though many of the mythological figures that were portrayed in the tombs were, in fact, Etruscan, they were derived from the inspiration of the Greeks.

Along side painting mythological subjects, the Etruscans were influenced from the Greek culture in other ways. During early excavations of the tombs in the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century, figurines and vessels were found in the tombs. The statuettes of men, women and animals made as votive gifts served as further evidence for religious worth ship in Etruria.⁷ Other surviving pieces that had been restored were bronze utensils and pottery fragments that compromise material dating from the early sixth to the fifth century.⁸ A part of the fragments from the decorative basins were found to be inspired from Samian or East Greek prototypes. Few vessels found were produced in Greece or France⁹. However, most of the vessels found in the tombs were actually Etruscan made but Greek taught. The fine painted pottery for banqueting found in temples in Olmo Bello Necropolis were taught by the Greek to the Etruscans.¹⁰ In the

⁵ Mark Cartwright, *Ancient History Encyclopedia*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sybille Haynes, *Etruscan Civilization: A Cultural History*, (The Getty Publications, 2000), 128-129

⁸ Ibid 128.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid 53.

late eighth-century, the Greeks had introduced the decoration of vessels with motifs of animals but also the use of the fast potter's wheel to be able to produce pottery quickly.¹¹

Though it may seem the Etruscans had only influential artistry from the Greeks, the Tomb of Triclinium hint to have inspiration from the Egyptians. The Tomb of Triclinium, c. 470 BCE, (Figure 2) located in the city of Tarquinia, is one of the tombs to host important information about the Etruscan funerary culture and the society of the living. It is composed of a single chamber with wall decorations painted in fresco. The scenes depict festivities of music and dancing; however, the figures gender are distinguish through common painterly conventions. The skin of the female is light in color while the male is portrayed darker in skin. These practices can also be found in ritual Egyptian funerary depictions.¹² Nonetheless, the Tomb of Triclinium allows one to understand that the funeral rites were not somber but festive. It was a way to feast and share a final meal with the deceased before transitioning to the afterlife. The walls were covered in frescos that incorporated ritual Etruscan burial iconography. Along with paintings, the Etruscans would also deposit appropriate items that the deceased would take along with them in the afterlife. Another purpose of Etruscan tombs and ritual was to reinforce the socio-economic position of the person who died.¹³ It served as a way to remind the community in Etruria the importance of the person and reinforce their position in the society.

According to ethnographic notes done by Isaac Taylor in Etruscan Researches, in Egypt and in Asia Minor, we find the same two types of tombs that were also found in Etruria. They

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Frederik Poulsen, *Etruscan Tomb Paintings*, (Рипол Классик, 1922), 10.

¹³ Oscan Magnan, The Meaning of the Afterlife in the Etruscan Tomb Paintings of Tarquinia. *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 157-170.

include the same characteristic elements of Turanian architecture; the tent and the cave are the two models of a house and also the same blueprint of the tombs. In each of the regions, each tomb includes a tumulus grave and a rock cut cave.¹⁴ There is no lack of artistry in any of the three cases; each are decorated with ornamental vessels and frescos that depict the joy that comes from living.

Because of the archaeological finds, Etruscan cemeteries and tombs serve as a glimpse into their culture and the inspiration gathered from surrounding areas. The Etruscans are believed to be one of the reasons for the flourishing of the Roman empire, however, Etruscan tombs demonstrate the manifestation of the Greek's and Egyptian's use of stylization of tombs. Though the Romans may have implemented many values from the Etruscans, the tombs found in Etruria serves as a glimpse into the lost world. From the monuments of Etruscan art—the vases, mural paintings to mythological subjects and sarcophaguses, the Etruscans gathers influence from surroundings empires and applied them into their culture to establish their own remarkable society. During the early Iron Age, central Italy prospered in hunting and agriculture while also hosting a land abundant in copper and iron which, in turn, molded the maturity of the Etruscan culture. In modern time, we are left with archeological sites of Etruscan tombs that aid in understanding the culture of Etruria. What was once a lost world, Etruscan tombs grants a glimpse into their practices for the deceased and their journey to the afterworld.

¹⁴ Isaac Taylor, *Etruscan Researches*, (Macmillan and Company, 1874), 41-45.

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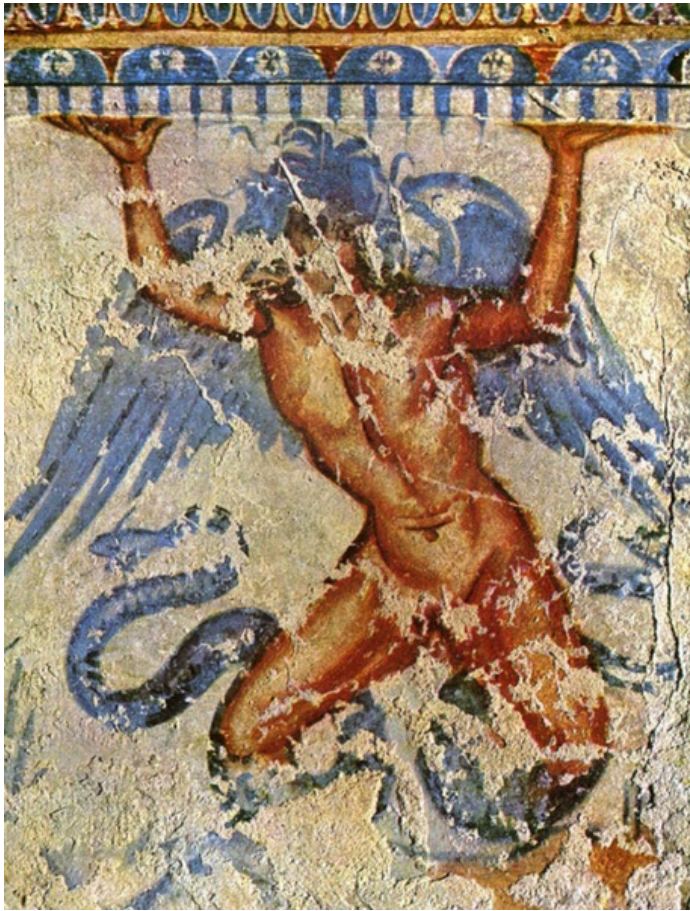
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Bottom, Tomb of the Blue Demons, 420-400 BCE (Figure 1)



Top right (Figure 2) Tomb of Triclinium, male and woman figure depicted in two different skin tones.



Fig. 33 Etrusco-geometric bird-shaped askos. From Tomb x, Olmo Bello necropolis, Bisenzio. Last quarter of eighth century B.C. Painted impasto. H. 28 cm. Rome, Museo Etrusco di Villa Giulia 57033/6.

Fig. 34 Etrusco-geometric vase. From Tomb 24, Olmo Bello necropolis, Bisenzio. Second half of eighth century B.C. Painted impasto. H. 22.5 cm. Rome, Museo Etrusco di Villa Giulia 57069/4.