

Greek myth—Etruscan symbol

Marjatta Nielsen

WHEN I RECEIVED the invitation to the symposium in Tromsø, I proposed to give a survey of the uses of Greek mythology among a group of outsiders, the Etruscans. Identifiable Greek myths appear in Etruscan art from the beginning to the end. Consequently, we can follow the subsequent stages of acculturation among a wealthy and influential pre-Roman people in Italy, by looking at the ways in which they received and understood Greek myths in the framework of their own culture. And, we have to remember that the Etruscans were not even Indo-Europeans, a fact that did not seem to bother them at all.

However, Synnøve des Bouvrie asked me to take up in my paper a certain topic, 'the Verucchio throne,' which I had presented at a colloquium on women in Antiquity in Gothenburg in 1997. No Greek nor local myths are depicted in the woodcarvings of the chair, but they may very well touch the question of 'symbol.' Therefore, my paper is divided into two parts, the first dealing with everyday scenes as symbolic expressions in early Etruscan art, the second with the uses of Greek myth as symbol among the Etruscans. In fact, the first part paves the way for understanding the second part.

I. Etruscan symbol: beyond the image

The history of symbolic expressions among the Etruscans brings us to the very beginning, to the protohistoric, pre-literate Villanova culture (ca. 900-700 BC), which covered the very same areas of Italy, which, after the introduction of writing, showed to belong to the Etruscans.¹

In the Villanovan period, burial urns of clay or bronze, helmets, horse-equipment, bronze belts *etc.* were decorated with geometric patterns, with no recognizable narrative contents. As in the case of Greek art in the Geometric period (Boardman 1983), the 'signs' and patterns in Villanova art may have contained

1 E.g. Bartoloni 1989.

narrative messages, but we cannot 'read' the stories. Probably even the contemporaries had difficulties, since every potter had their own individual 'language'.²

The lack of narrative elements in art is by no means a guarantee for a lack of verbal narratives, as we can see from the famous *kotyle* from the Euboean settlement of Pithekoussai, the so-called 'Nestor's cup,' decorated with Geometric patterns and birds, but furnished with the earliest known Greek metric text and 'literary' allusion.³ Pithekoussai/Ischia in the Bay of Naples was a true melting pot of Greek, Phoenician, and indigenous Italic and Etruscan influences. Etruscan iron was the magnet which attracted Greeks to as close to Etruria as the Etruscans allowed them to come.⁴

In Etruria, in the late eighth century BC, biconical urns of the old Villanova shapes were occasionally made following new pottery techniques, including painting. Birds are the only recognisable creatures on many pots, but soon also men, women and horses begin to appear. At times we may discern rudimentary narrative contents, hunting scenes being among the earliest favourites.⁵

Some early representations give with simple means a basic idea of the social organization and everyday life.⁶ Among them is the 'Verucchio throne,' a round-backed chair of a shape as if cut out of a tree-trunk.⁷ The Villanovan-Etruscan enclave of Verucchio is situated on a steep hill-top, not far from the Adriatic coast, *i.e.*, outside Etruria proper, with which it is communicating through the Marecchia valley and through passes over the Appennines. At Verucchio, the grave pits in the necropoleis down the hill were filled with water and mud, which have secured the

2 According to Judith Toms' studies on Villanova pottery from Tarquinia (paper given at the University of Copenhagen 15th May 1997).

3 Ridgway 1992:56, 1997, Buchner-Ridgway 1993:212, 745-59, Skaftø Jensen 1996, all with many further refs.

4 A victim of Etruscan methods of keeping the strangers away may be a man, who was killed and buried with an Euboean vase as the only gravegoods in the 'sacred area' in Pian di Civita, Tarquinia: Tarquinia 1997, Bonghi Jovino, Mallegni and Usai 1997. Herodotus' account on the fate of Phocaeans prisoners, killed near Cerveteri, seems confirmed by archaeological evidence, *cf.* Torelli 1981.

5 *E.g.* a Geometric stamoid jar, 700-680 BC, with a man assaulting a woman, in the presence of a horse and a boy, Princeton University Art Museum (inv. 1996-157-158). For rudimentary narrative contents in Etruria in the Orientalising period, *e.g.* Camporeale 1989, 1991, Maggiani 1996, Nardi 1997, and below.

6 Menichetti 1994. *Cf.* particularly the bronze urns and wheeled cauldron from Bisenzio, the necropolis of Olmo Bello, latest Massa-Pairault 1996:27, 35, Torelli 1997a:28, 35-36, 43a, *id.* 1997b.

7 First published by Gentili 1987. Among the undecorated 'thrones' at Verucchio there are some which are genuinely cut out of one piece of tree-trunk, but they go easily out of shape. For that reason, and not only for saving wood, most of the chairs of that shape are made of thinner boards, consolidated with metal rivets, or they are entirely covered with bronze sheet.

preservation of all those organic materials which we normally are missing. Several such chairs have been found there, most of them only decorated with wheel-shaped perforations—perhaps celestial symbols?⁸ At least two chairs have, however, figured scenes. One, from tomb 26 of the Moroni necropolis (Sassatelli 1996:261 fig. 16) is too fragmentary for a reconstruction of the scenes, but another one, from the rich tomb 89 in the Lippi necropolis, has been reconstructed with only few pieces missing. The outer side is as if imitating basketry patterns, while the elaborate woodcarvings on the inner side of the chair-back give us a unique glimpse into village life about 650-600 BC.

My immediate impression, when studying the chair some years ago in the well-lit room in the Museo Civico Archeologico at Bologna,⁹ was that the scenes were depicting the microcosmos of a village community and the division of male and female competencies within it. And, what I remember from my student days when studying Finnish ethnology suggested me that the chair and its decorations might have something to do with wedding and bridal gifts—more or less the only occasion which brings men to underline the balance between the sexes and to give due credit also to women's contribution to the family and society. Then, reading more about the throne, I was persuaded by G.V. Gentili's (1987) interpretation of the scenes as giving the whole story of wool-working (Nielsen 1998:71-73, with refs.). Only recently—after the symposium in Tromsø—I became acquainted with Mario Torelli's interpretation, which also brings in wedding symbolism, and with Giuseppe Sassatelli's study which places the scenes in a wider context of aristocratic household.¹⁰ By and large I agree with both, but encouraged by the support given to my original interpretation which I presented at Tromsø, I will take it as the basis of the discussion (Fig. 1).

The space with the figured decorations is divided horizontally into two registers, upper and lower, and vertically into three, a central part surrounded by mar-

8 Perhaps the reason for these perforated decorations was originally due to masking some branch scars.

9 The contents of the tombs Lippi 85 and 89 were then exhibited in full day-light in the Museo Civico Archeologico, which was good for scholars but disastrous for organic material. Therefore the dim light in the museum at Verucchio is ideal for the conservation of the objects, but the rapidly moving spotlight directed towards the throne prevents any attempt of checking the details. Good detail pictures are published by Massa-Pairault 1996, and Torelli 1997a (but some of them reversed). Patrizia von Eles informs that a more reliable drawing will be available in 2002; that may cause alterations to the present interpretations.*

10 Sassatelli 1996, Torelli 1997a:52-85 (but already published in 1992), both with further references to diverging interpretations, such as Kossack 1992 (which does not sound very convincing). See also Massa-Pairault 1996:63, 65, Torelli 1997b. A series of further 'thronological' studies (the Verucchio chair has created a whole new discipline) are on their way, e.g. by Adriano Maggiani (who does not share Torelli's interpretation), and by Larissa Bonfante, who is in favour of the division of labour between the sexes (both personal communications).

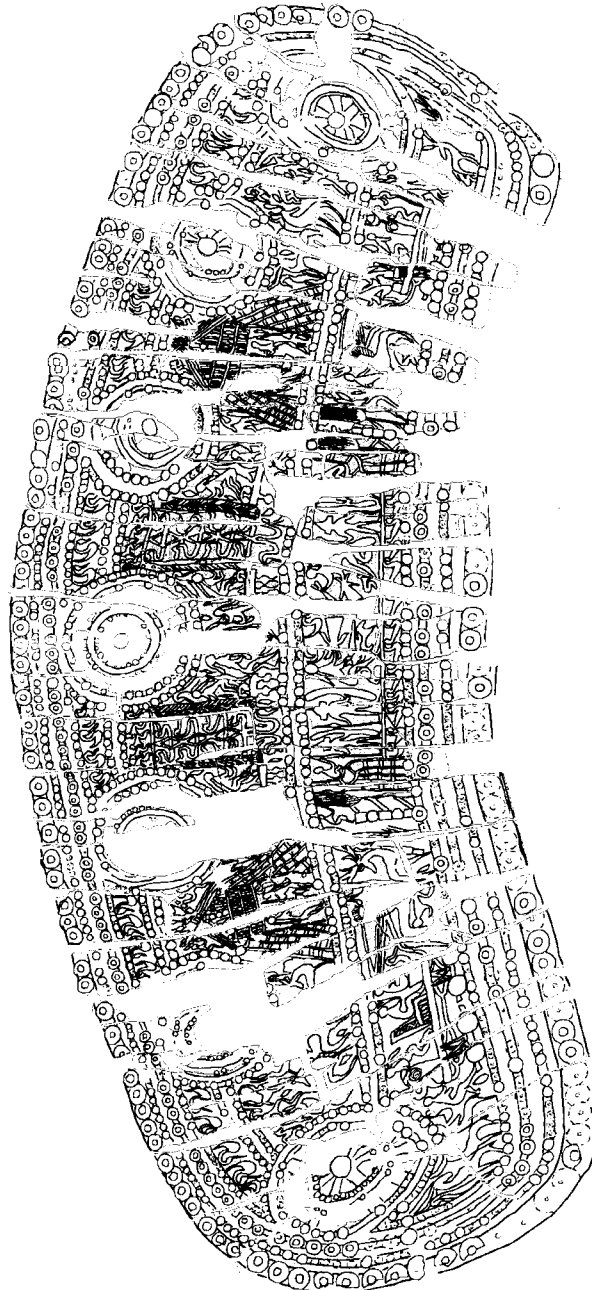
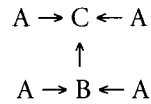


Fig. 1. The figured scenes of the wooden throne from Verucchio, tomb 89 of the Lippi necropolis. Ca. 650-600 BC. The letters indicate the zones referred to: A) 'wild life,' B) men's domain, C) women's domain. Verucchio, Museo Civico Archeologico (drawing Guerriero e sacerdote 2002, pl. xxvi). See *additional note p. 194.

ginal zones. A vertical axe through the centre divides the chairback into two symmetrical parts, right and left, each other's mirror images, probably achieved by reversing a perforated model sheet, *e.g.* made of leather. The marginal areas (marked 'A') both in the upper and the lower register are characterised by the presence of horned animals. The upper central zone ('C') shows human figures mostly having a long back braid, *i.e.* women, while the braid is lacking in the lower central zone ('B'), so there we are probably dealing with men.

The scenes are best described from the margins towards the centre, from bottom to top, in the following order:



The areas 'A' with animals describe the wilderness, outside the men's (and women's) domain, a 'liminal space'. The animals have mostly been interpreted as sheep,¹¹ but both their size and the many-forked horns rather define them as deer. Here and there between the animals seem to be human beings—perhaps hunters, shepherds, or even enemies or outlaws?

Still within the 'wild life area' (as the big deer indicate) two wagons are proceeding towards the centre. The wagons are quite big, undoubtedly four-wheeled, and they are pulled by oxen and steered by a man. The passenger on the wagon (at least the one to the left) is a man, comfortably sitting on a chair; his oversized, two-forked hand may perhaps be understood as a hand holding up a sign of rank (*cf.* Torelli 1997b). The main person on the right hand wagon is regrettably damaged. Torelli (1997a) has interpreted the figure as a woman, seeing the tip of a back braid near the figure's back. But this detail is too uncertain to allow us to interpret them as a bride and a groom approaching each other. Anyway, behind the two persons sitting on each wagons, two small figures are keeping a big jar or situla in balance, or protecting it. One more person is running behind the wagon, and another one is as if crawling by its side—whether they are helpers or adversaries is difficult to decide, but their status is decidedly lower.

The wagons are approaching the central area ('B'), marked by a pole (perhaps a fence), on which a boy is standing, perhaps angling, while two others are perhaps fishing with net.¹² A frieze of waterfowls between these probably indicates a shore

11 Gentili 1987, and following him I have elaborated the idea (1998:71 n. 9) that they would be sheep of the long-legged and big-horned 'prehistoric' breed which still exist on islands in peripheral areas of Northern Europe and North Atlantic. Their fleece does not need shearing, but plucking and picking up. But, detail pictures show that not all these animals fit that description, their horns have too many branches.

12 Gentili 1987 interprets the boys occupied with washing and carding wool and arranging it into rolls ready for spinning.

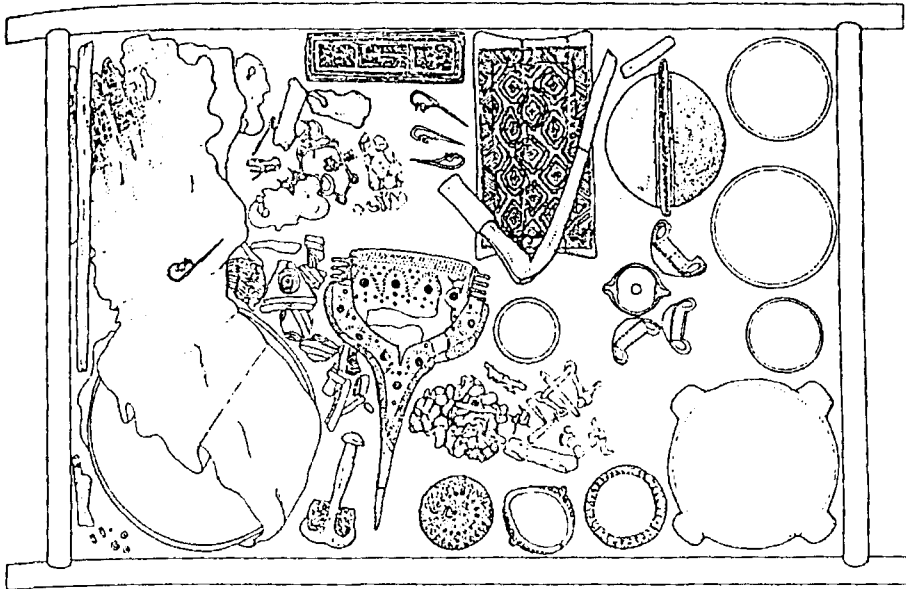


Fig. 2. Verucchio, the Lippi necropolis, tomb 89, plan of the big wooden box containing the cinerary urn and the grave goods. The throne was found on top of the box. Ca. 650-600 BC. Verucchio, Museo Civico Archeologico (from Malnati and Manfredi 1991)

or a riverbank—an *emporium* by the Marecchia river, perhaps at a ford? There, two pairs of armed warriors supervise on both sides the very centre of the scene, where division of meat, hides or other goods is taking place. As to the helmets of the warriors, they are of the late Villanovan type, similar to one of them found in the tomb in question (seen in Fig. 2). The helmet has the customary transversal, pointed comb of bronze sheet, while another helmet from the tomb has a comb of bristles.¹³

The wood-carver seems to have known very well how to give visual form to anthropological theories concerning the system of tribute and redistribution, controlled by chieftains.¹⁴ The presence of the warriors may raise the question, whether they represent the chief who controls the collective labour in a community, or whether all peaceful activities outside the village actually needed armed guards because of raiding typical of pastoral societies (*cf.* Lincoln 1981).

It may be no coincidence that the village itself is shown in the upper register ('C'), and the surrounding world in the lower zone, Verucchio's location on a hill-

13 *Cf.* Torelli 1997a:75-76; for helmets of many provenances at Verucchio, Cristofani 1997a:188.

14 *Cf. e.g.* Lincoln 1981, with further refs., *id.* 1989:75, 219-20. At times these theories do make sense when interpreting archaeological finds.

top taken into consideration. But this is also a recurrent way of reading images, from bottom to top, in early Etruscan imagery.¹⁵

Also the village is surrounded on either side by wilderness (at least the animals do not look more domesticated), and the two huts mark the limit. Here and there, e.g. on the roofs, there are some small 'genderless' figures, perhaps children, but the rest of the persons can be defined as women because of the long braids. The birds on the roof may either represent living birds, or rather decorated ridge-poles like those depicted on clay- and bronze hut urns.¹⁶

All the women are in activity. Two pairs of women are cooking or pestling grain in front of the two big huts.¹⁷ There is a possibility that they are imagined to be inside, and that everything happening between the two hut gables is supposed to take place indoors, but I continue the description according to how the scenes are actually represented. Between the houses there are two women spinning, and in the very centre of the village there are two pairs of vertical looms, high and imposing. In front of the looms, on solid stands, weavers are seated on chairs, with their feet resting on foot-stools. The cloth itself is patterned with the recurrent motif of the time, duck-stemmed boats (These boats have a long history in the European Bronze-Age). The height of the looms has probably been exaggerated in order to show the woven fabric, which would otherwise have been rolled around the top beam and invisible. Some ape-like figures on top of the looms may belong to the pattern of the fabric, but they could also be children lifting groups of warp yarn to make the pattern.¹⁸

So, what we have here is a perfect description of how the world is made up, and how its inhabitants have their fields of competences according to sex, age, and rank, but all necessary and important for the whole community. This is a chair worthy a chieftain¹⁹—or perhaps his wife.

15 E.g. the Bologna *tintinnabulum*, fig. 3; cf. Maggiani 1996, a proposal for the interpretation of the metope decorations on a stepped nenfro slab from Tarquinia.

16 E.g. the well-known bronze hut urn from Vulci (Massa-Pairault 1996:39).

17 Gentili 1987 sees them dyeing yarn, and this has been followed by many, cf. Pairault-Massa 1996:63, Nielsen 1998:71-72. Gentili thinks the women are inside the huts, but at least dyeing is a work which is best done outdoors.

18 In 1999 a team of Chinese silk damast weavers showed their skills at the Danish National Museum, where a huge loom was installed. The male weaver was working on the floor level at the horizontal loom, into which a vertical construction was joined, and on top of the latter, about 3-4 meters up, a light-weight girl was balancing while doing her demanding work with the warp.

19 In fact, several Etruscan chamber tombs have such chairs carved in the rock, and normally they appear in pairs, both for the *paterfamilias* and the *materfamilias* (latest e.g. Prayon 1998). Sassatelli (1996) thinks that the chair would very well have been placed in the antechamber of a chieftain's house, where guests and clients were received.

But, who was the chair made for, and by whom? In later times in many rural communities in Europe, *e.g.* in Northern Scandinavia,²⁰ bridegrooms were supposed to show their skills by giving finely carved weaving equipment as gifts to their brides—and the brides were supposed to use them when preparing their trousseau, and later on in their married life.²¹

Drawing from such ethnological parallels, I suggest that the chair would have been a wedding present, or part of a bridegroom's contribution to the household furniture. Whether he had carved the chair himself or let someone else to do it,²² our bridegroom wished to draw attention to his own male identity as a member of the elite, and to describe the male contribution to the economy of the community, but at the same time giving proper credit to the female occupation of spinning and weaving.

In fact, in this period, carpentry tools often appear in very rich male tombs (Nielsen 1998:72 n. 11 with refs.), which means that woodcarving was not at all degrading for elite men, as little as spinning and weaving were for women. Odysseus and Penelope come into mind as high-status master carpenters and weavers, and, in fact, both activities were excellent occasions for story-telling.

But who was buried in the tomb, a man or a woman, or both? This is not quite evident from the grave goods (Fig. 2), and the bones (as far as I know) have not been well enough preserved to permit an analysis.²³ The chair was placed on top of the big wooden box containing the cremation urn and all the grave goods. These included mainly male objects and nothing connected with spinning and weaving, the normal female grave goods ever since the Villanovan period. In addition to two different kinds of helmets, there were an axe, horse equipment, banquet service, amber and other ornaments, but of types prevalently found in male tombs, although the dividing line is difficult to draw. Even the fan, whose beautifully carved shaft is preserved, was no female prerogative in this period (Guldager Bilde 1994), although its relatively small size might point to a woman.²⁴ The large

20 With all these parallels from the northernmost Europe I am not implying that the contacts (direct or indirect) established in the amber-trade period into which the Verucchio throne belongs, would have been conserved in the North ever since, as if in a refrigerator. But, thinly populated, peripheral areas do conserve cultural features forgotten long ago in more progressive areas, and there domestic modes of production have been a necessary supplement to traded commodities. This also gives people a basic sense of quality and appreciation of handwork.

21 Much material in Scandinavian museums, *e.g.* at the National Museum in Helsinki.

22 The fragment from the tomb Moroni 26 (Sassatelli 1996:261 fig. 16) seems to be made by the same carpenter, so we are probably dealing with a purchased piece of furniture.

23 Unlike other organic materials, the bones from the Verucchio tombs are badly preserved. However, there was only one cinerary urn. On the gravegoods, see *e.g.* Gentili 1987, Malnati and Manfredi 1991, Torelli 1997a:55.

24 Men are not actually represented fanning themselves, this is done by servants waving heavy fans. The feathers or leaves of the fan have of course made them more imposing.

wooden 'coffin' was covered by a woollen garment, probably of reddish colour (purple?), which might point to a woman, but this is not certain either.²⁵

It is even possible that the grave contained a double burial—perhaps two men, or, why not, a man and a woman together?²⁶ In fact, Etruscan women's tombs from the Orientalising period do exhibit arms and armour, horses and wagons, so why not even a helmet of her own?²⁷ Be that as it may, the chair could well have been a chieftain's 'throne', but also the widow's counter-gift to her dead husband, from whom she had got it—an analogy to spindle-whorls, sometimes given as secondary gifts to men's graves.

Many other graves at Verucchio have yielded remains of textiles, too, since cremation urns were often 'clad' in clothes. These confirm the ability of the weavers in making very fine fabrics and elaborate patterns. The cloth was not necessarily woven to measure, but cut and sewn to fit the shape of the body. Woven patterns also influenced carpentry, as we can see from the chequered diamond twill pattern, imitated in the carvings of the foot-stool found in our tomb (seen Fig. 2; cf. von Eles 1994:figs. 36, 53). We may take this as a sign of male recognition of the weavers' skills (cf. Scheid and Svenbro 1996).

From the tombs in Verucchio, amber jewellery of astounding quantity and quality have been found, locally made by extremely skilled artisans, who utilised amber imported from the Baltic area (*Dono delle Eliadi* 1994). Not only jewellery was made of amber, but sometimes also spindles (or distaffs), probably too fragile to be used for other purposes than as mere status symbols (cf. Martelli 1995). The wealth of Verucchio seems to have been based on far-reaching exchange. Perhaps the textiles were Verucchio's own contribution to the trade, so women had certainly earned their share of the luxury goods.

The tree-trunk throne was used not only for ceremonial purposes (cf. the Murlo chairs, Fig. 3), but also for such domestic activities as wool-working. From a rich female tomb from Bologna were not only found many items of gold jewellery and amber necklaces, but also a bronze rattle-pendant, a *tintinnabulum*, an object often found in girls' and women's graves. When the pendant was cleansed about 1970, it proved to have previously unnoticed reliefs, showing wool-working women (Fig. 4).²⁸ Below, we see two women sitting on tree-trunk thrones fixing carded

25 Patrizia von Eles told on a guided tour through the Verucchio museum for the Forlì congress excursionists in Sept. 1996 that coloured textiles were mainly found in women's graves, while men's robes were normally undyed. I have greatly profited from her inspiring presentation of the museum.

26 Torelli 1997b. Cf. the two young warriors buried side by side in the Orientalising grave of Casal Marittimo (*Principi guerrieri* 1999).

27 E.g. the important reassessment of the Regolini Galassi tomb of Cerveteri, by Colonna and Di Paolo 1997, with refs.

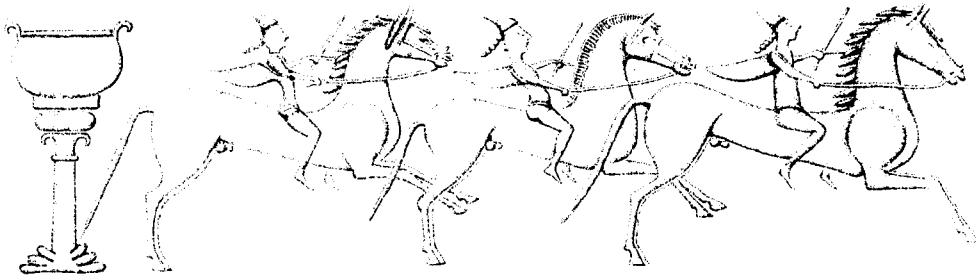
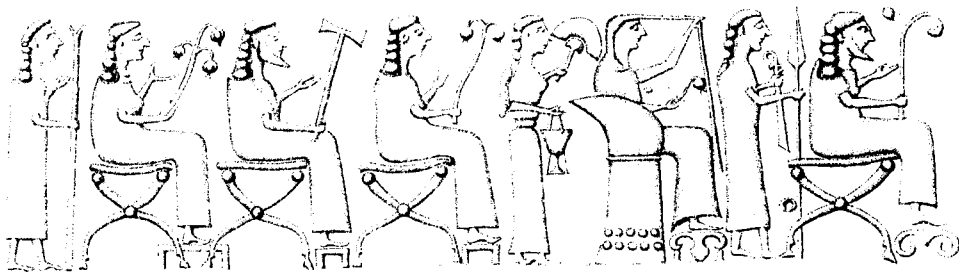
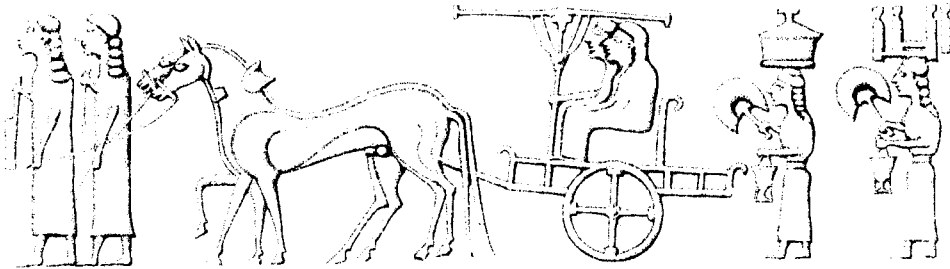
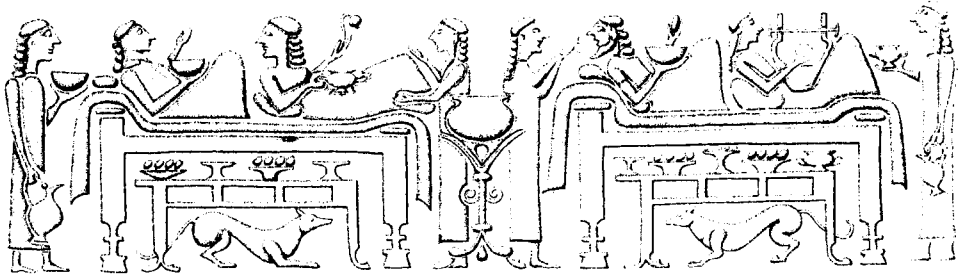


Fig. 3. The four types of frieze plaques from Poggio Civitate, Murlo, ca. 580 BC. From above: banquet, journey on wagon, reunion (note that the most important woman, the second from the right, is sitting on a round-backed throne), horse race. Murlo, Antiquarium (from Rathje 1993:136)

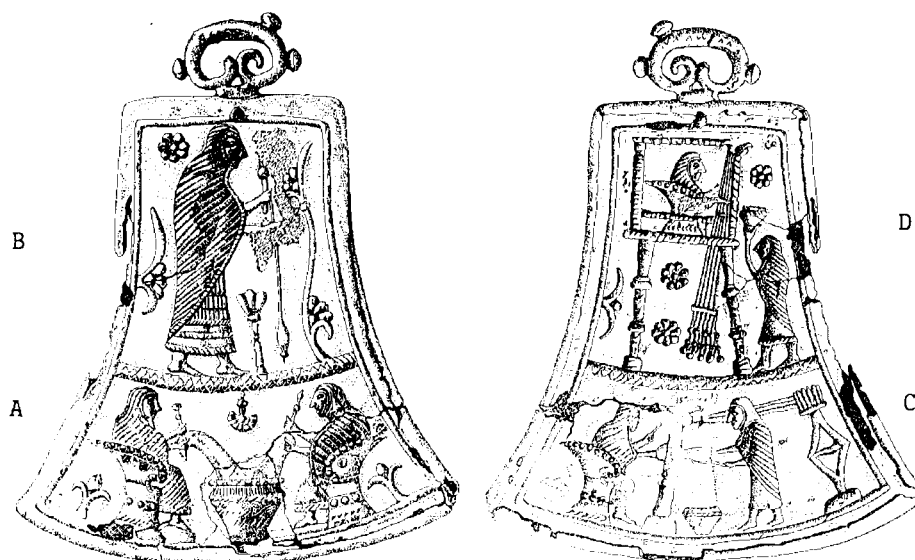


Fig. 4. Bronze tintinnabulum, from tomb 5 of the Arsenale necropolis, ca. 600 BC. Stages of textile work: A) carding, B) spinning, C) warping, D) weaving. Bologna, Museo Civico Archeologico (drawing from Morigi Govi 1971)

wool on distaffs. Above, a woman is spinning while walking, thus manifesting her female virtue of never having idle hands. On the other side of the pendant, two women are fixing the warp yarn, a very time-consuming and demanding task, which requires much attention to counting and precision. Then, the final stage of weaving, done by one more woman sitting on a tree-trunk chair, placed high up on a scaffolding in front of a warp-weighted loom—comfortable but quite risky.²⁹

This means that in the seventh and early sixth centuries BC women at the loom were still a reality also among the elite. Rests of looms found in dwellings and residences of the period testify to weaving as a home industry. But, spinning and weaving had also become the very symbol of domesticity, in contrast to men's mobility, and especially a bridal symbol for girls preparing their trousseau (*cf.* Bietti Sestieri 1996:123). In this respect Etruscan women do not differ the least from

28 Morigi Govi 1971. Latest, Massa-Pairault 1996:66, Torelli 1997a:60, figs. 47-48, Nielsen 1998:70, pl. viii.

29 The podia and scaffoldings are common features for the representations of the Verucchio and the Bologna looms. In northern Scandinavia the warp-weighted looms have survived to our days, but there the initial stage of weaving is normally done when standing on a bench in order to reach the top of the loom (Hoffmann 1964). The well-known black-figure lekythos in New York shows two women standing on the ground when weaving (*e.g.* cover of Barber 1994).

their Greek or Roman sisters. Tanaquil, the wife of the first Etruscan king in Rome, Tarquinius Priscus, was recorded to have woven the first *tunica recta*, and her distaff and wool were shown for centuries in a temple founded by her.³⁰ Nor is Livy's account about the spinning Lucretia at all anachronistic (1.57-59), so there is no need to take all stories about spinning elite women entirely as products of the Augustan back-to-basics campaign (so Ogilvie 1965:222).

But also long after the craft had been taken over by professional weavers, male and female, textile work continued to be the very symbol of female virtue.³¹ That textile work may also be fun, an intellectual and creative challenge, or a necessary method for saving money or make an honourable way of living, is not the main reason why girls are taught it in the 20th century. Just take a look at the prefaces to school books for needlework classes. The main paedagogic aim is invariably something else than to train the girls' artistic talents or practice applied mathematics. Instead, by learning knitting and sewing girls are being 'domesticated,' they learn to be patient and diligent, neat and tidy. The neatness of their handwork is simply considered a mirror of their capacities as wives and housekeepers—to check their needlework was once enough to judge their character. But this evaluation was left to other women, future in-laws who examined the trousseau, not the bridegroom.

Now all this has lost its real economic importance (although it is still practical to master some elementary mending), and 'spinster' has got the meaning 'unmarried woman.' The Verucchio and Bologna ladies were probably doing many other things, but it was their capacity of producing textiles—not motherhood, for example—which became the symbol of their womanhood.³² Real needs in a society are in constant change, while the ideas connected to the needs/objects tend to halt behind, and turn into abstractions. At the outset, the connection between things and their meaning is quite concrete, there is no place for symbolical expressions. But, if the connection is totally lost, the symbol loses its power.

30 Varro, in Plut. *Quaest.Rom.* 30; Plin. *HN* 8.194. On the tradition, Torelli 1984:31-33, 104, 136; Rallo, in *Donne* 1989:31 n. 101.

31 Cf. for the Roman period, Larsson Lovén 1998, or the spinning and lace-making women in Dutch 17th-century painting, Franits 1993.

32 I recently heard in the Danish radio an interview with a young Danish man, who 'in search of his limits' (according to the current expression in a well-fare society) had passed a couple of years in Siberia, and survived among the local people as a hunter under extreme circumstances. He became aware of how much his mentality had changed, when he began to think about staying there and marrying a girl. The most important criterium for the choice was not her looks, or whether she was pleasant company or not, but her capacity of sewing warm fur clothes and making food out of nothing, *i.e.* survival strategies.

II. Greek myth as symbol among the Etruscans: parallel stories

Returning to the topic I initially had intended to explore, we might call the chapter 'Etruscan warp, Greek weft.' In Etruria proper recognisable Greek myths entered the imagery, with which the Etruscan aristocrats were surrounding themselves, about 700 BC, more or less at the same time when the art of writing was introduced. The Etruscans never abandoned the local imagery describing life and after-life, but Greek myths took an increasing part of their imagery, not only decorations on imported vases, and on vases made by immigrant artisans (as the famous 'Blinding of Polyphemos' on the crater made in Cerveteri and signed by Aristonothos), but also on entirely local products.³³ One of the most prestigious import vases, the François crater from Chiusi, was a real check-list of Greek mythology, and, for safety, furnished with explanations of the figured scenes.³⁴

Already at an early stage Greek myths must have given the Etruscans occasions for self-identification, they belonged to the civilised peoples who knew what Greek myth was all about. However, the many deviations from 'canonic' Greek texts have often been taken as signs of Etruscan ignorance about the myths. Only recently scholars have increasingly realised that one cannot expect Etruscans to have followed texts which had not yet been written down, but circulated in many versions, also in the Greek world, and kept doing so for centuries.³⁵ There are many examples of badly documented versions of Greek myths which have found their way to Etruscan art, e.g. mirror decorations, which are particularly valuable because inscriptions often identify the subjects.³⁶

Naturally, those myths were preferred, which gave sense in the local context, in the specific area of life—or death—for which the object or building was designed. The Etruscans even accepted stories told about themselves, as the metamorphosis of Tyrrhenian pirates turned into dolphins by Dionysus (Martelli 1987:no. 130).

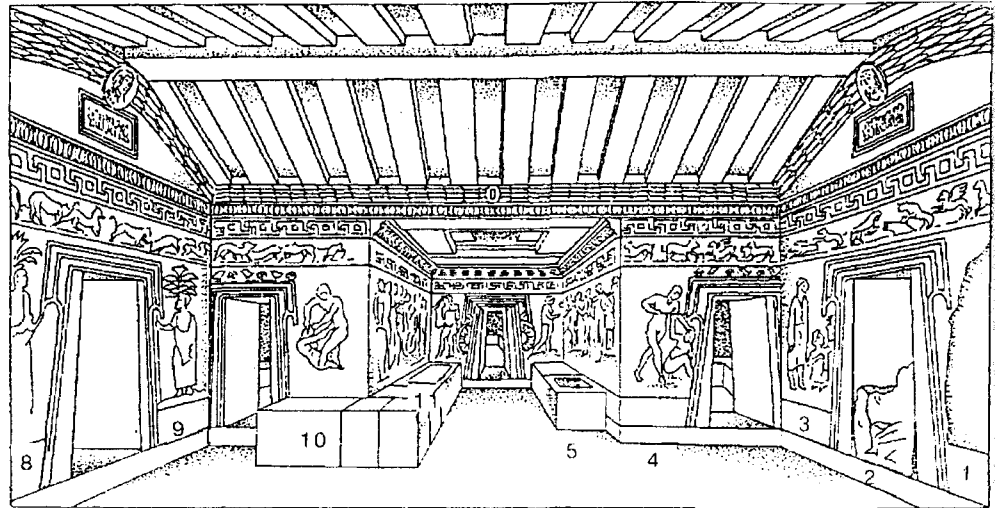
Towards the end of the sixth century, Etruscan monarchy came to an end in Rome, and so it did in Etruria, with the sole difference that there the power re-

33 The earliest candidate for a mythological representation from Etruria, is a locally made, Geometric oinochoe from Vulci, ca. 750-725 BC, possibly with the crane dance of Theseus and Ariadne (London, British Museum, inv. 49.5-18.18; Martelli 1996:611). For other early mythological representations in Etruria, see e.g. Rizzo and Martelli 1989, Maggiani 1996; Martelli 1996:611-613; Massa-Pairault 1996:77-88. For the Aristonothos vase, see e.g. Martelli 1987:no. 40, *Ulisse* 1996:45, Skafte Jensen 1996:146. For the problem in general, see e.g. Colonna 1989, *Le mythe grec dans l'Italie antique* 1999. The share of Greek motifs or objects in Etruria is, however, much greater in publications and museum exhibitions than in archaeological excavations. I can assure that it is quite possible to excavate for years without finding anything related to Greek myths at all—but that may be the case also in Greece.

34 Latest Mackay, Harrison and Masters 1999.

35 Cf. Skafte Jensen 1996, 1997. The same applied to Greek art, cf. Snodgrass 1998.

36 E.g. van der Meer 1995, De Puma 1998.



The numbers refer to the following scenes:

Left:

Right:

Greek mythical soothsayers
in the Hades:

Family members buried in the
tomb:

6 Sisyphus and Amphiaraus
7 Ajax and Cassandra
8 Phoenix
9 Nestor

1 Family member/ancestor
2 Family member/ancestor
3 Vel Saties and Arnza taking
omens (?)

Greek myth:

Etrusco-Roman legend:

Duels between equals, both will die:

10 Eteocles and Polyneices

4 Marce Camitlnas and Cneve
Tarchunie Rumach

Human sacrifice after war:

11 Sacrifice of Trojan
prisoners at the funeral of
Patroclus, himself present
as a shadow

5 Blood-dripping struggles
between Avle and Caile Vipinas
and Macstrna

Fig. 5. The François tomb, Vulci, ca. 350-325 BC. The pictorial program divides the central 'atrium' in two directions. Lengthwise, there are two almost symmetrical halves, the right one dedicated to ancestors and local 'heroes', the left one to Greek mythological ones. Across this division comes another one, the foremost part of the 'atrium' showing on both sides persons with prophetic gifts, while the back of the room shows ritual killing of captured enemies.

Fig. 5a. View through the 'atrium' (from Sgubini Moretti 1989:176 fig. 133).

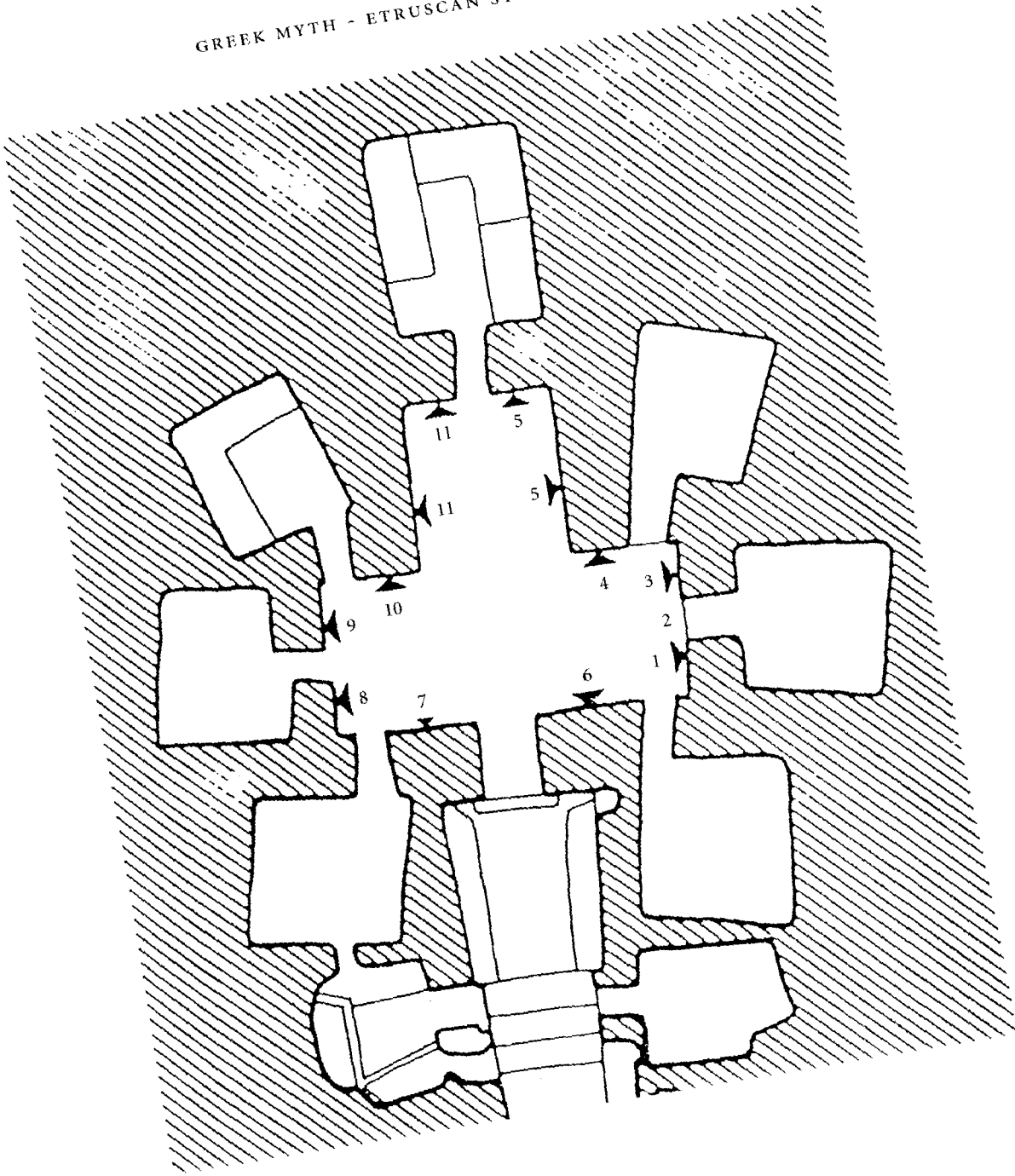


Fig. 5b. Plan of the tomb

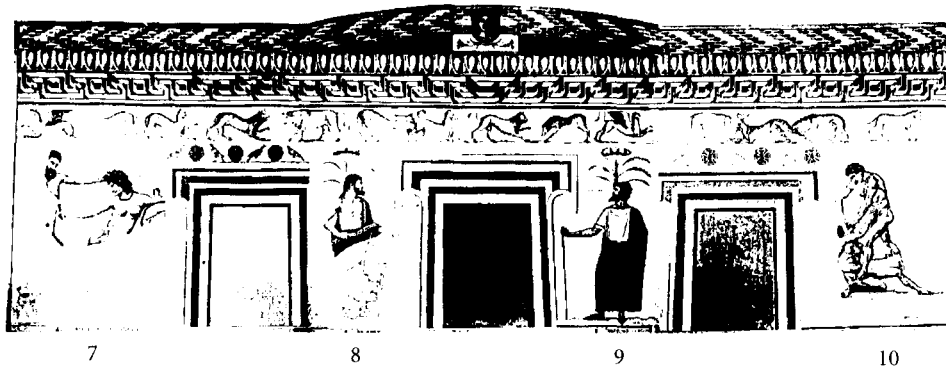
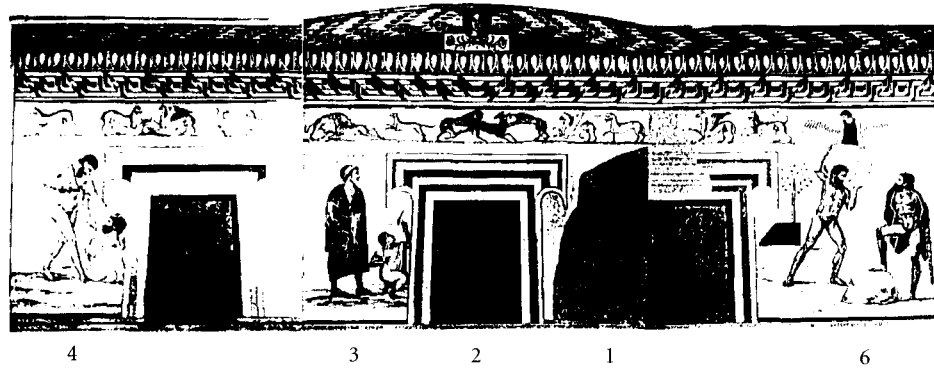


Fig. 5c. Carlo Ruspi's facsimile copies of the wall paintings in the 'atrium,' not quite reliable in detail.
 Above: right and left half of the backmost part of the tomb
 Centre: right side of the central room
 Below: left side of the central room
 (from *Tomba François* 1987:180).

mained in Etruscan hands. The 'palaces' of Murlo³⁷ and Acquarossa were destroyed and their remains carefully buried in the ground, obviously following an 'un-founding rite',³⁸ and the sites were abandoned. Also the excavations in the urban area of Cerveteri have revealed traces of a similar upheaval: a *regia*-like residence was destroyed and substituted by a meeting place (Cristofani 1997b). Similar finds are likely to turn up in other places, too, if the circumstances permit excavations on the right spot.

No contemporary pictorial representations of such social and political disruptions survive, but, although the events during the monarchic period may have been subject to *damnatio memoriae*, they were not forgotten altogether. Long before Livy, about 350/325 BC, the paintings of the well-known François tomb at Vulci (Fig. 5a, b, c) constitute the oldest surviving source for the struggles between the brothers Vipina/Vibenna, and a certain Macstarna, whom emperor Claudius in his speech in the Roman senate in 48 AD told was identical with Servius Tullius.³⁹

In the François tomb there is an interesting juxtaposition of the more or less legendary, Etrusco-Roman historical past, the sixth century BC, and the decidedly mythical past, the sacrifice of the Trojan prisoners at the funeral of Patroclus.⁴⁰ The left half of the central room shows episodes from the Greek myth, and the right half analogous happenings in the Etrusco-Roman history. In the foremost part of the central room, to the left are shown Greek mythical soothsayers, by now residing in Hades, and to the right persons buried in the tomb: the founder of the tomb, Vel Saties himself and probably some of his ancestors and his offspring.⁴¹

So, we have an example of a pictorial program, which expresses the cyclical conception of time, a fundamental feature in Etruscan culture: the past, the present, and the future were interdependable, similar actions were believed to repeat themselves cyclically, and therefore they were predictable.⁴² Among the Saties family, we might speak about an instrumentalisation of the past as well as that of

37 Rathje 1993.

38 Edlund-Berry 1994. De Grummond 1997 has recently questioned both the ritual burial of the site and the very function of the complex itself, proposing it to be a multi-functional market place controlled by a central authority, similar to phenomena in the same period in Rome.

39 For the sources, see e.g. *Tomba François* 1987:225-42 (including Claudius' speech written down on bronze tablets found in Lyon); Ampolo 1988:205-13, Briquel 1990.

40 Coarelli 1983, widely followed by other scholars, latest Holliday 1993, Flower 1996:213 n. 140 with refs., 215-16. The Trojan prisoners also appear elsewhere in Etruscan art, cf. Maggiani (*Artigianato artistico* 1985:208-12).

41 The founder of the tomb, Vel Saties, is perhaps not shown observing a bird's flight in order to take omens before a battle, the *opinio communis* which has latest been challenged by Weber-Lehmann 2000: Arzna is not a dwarf, but a child with his pet bird held in a string. Then, the child as such would represent the future generations. Yet, Vel Saties' eyes are still turned towards the sky.

the future (*cf.* Lincoln 1989:esp. 38-50). By now the direction for reading images, from right to left (the same as in writing) had been established in Etruscan art,⁴³ so we may conclude that the family history and the local past were the point of departure, into which the Greek myth is projected, backwards.⁴⁴

We do not know of other representations of Macstarna/Servius Tullius, but the Vipina brothers are lurking here and there in later Etruscan art. On an incised and inscribed mirror from Bolsena,⁴⁵ Avle and Caile Vipina are preparing to capture Cacū, an Apollon-like soothsayer, whose young assistant Artile is writing down his revelations, perhaps *carmina acherontica*.

The legend of the capture of Cacū by the Vipina brothers was not an episode which was forgotten later on, either, their exploits had developed into a legend, and all kinds of Herculean labours were attributed to them.⁴⁶ The previously mentioned mirror helps us to identify the same protagonists on some early second-century cinerary urns from Chiusi and Volterra.⁴⁷ I just give one example (Fig. 6), where the capture of Cacū is part of an iconographic program, the three most prestigious cinerary urns designed for the family tomb of the Purnis near Chiusi, all three urns being executed by a sculptor, whose training in up-to-date Hellenistic art is evident.

The same 'Purni Master,' as I propose to call him, utilised almost the same composition for another urn from the same tomb, but this time depicting a Greek myth (Fig. 7).⁴⁸ Orestes is sitting on his father Agamemnon's tomb, tormented by

42 Coarelli 1983, with refs. to Marta Sordi's work. *Cf.* Nielsen 1999. It has been discussed, whether a similar parallelism of time, mythical past and contemporary actions, already have been present in the images of the Tragliatella oinochoe from ca. 600 BC, *cf.* Menichetti 1994:57 (contra, d'Agostino, disc. in *Modi e funzioni* 1995:244-45), Massa-Pairault 1996:80-81, Torelli 1997a:29-30.

43 *Cf.* Small 1992:55-56. The direction of 'reading' *e.g.* tomb pictures is a very important key to the proper understanding of them, as shown *e.g.* by Roncalli 1997, 2001.

44 This is why I have changed the numbering of the scenes in the François tomb, beginning from the entrance, and not from the back chamber, although this is what the spectator sees when entering the tomb.

45 *E.g.* Small 1979, 1982, *Tomba François* 1987:242, *LIMC*, s.v. Cacū.

46 Here are no allusions to Cacū as a cattle-thief, as in the Roman legend 'Cacus captured by Hercules,' modelled on the Greek myth of Herakles and Geryon. *Cf.* Small 1982, Bremmer and Horsfall 1987.

47 *Cf.* Small 1982. The urn Florence MA 5801 has now been proved to come from Volterra: Bocci Pacini 1997:365.

48 Nielsen 1996a:no. 28. In fact, the composition was created for 'Orestes and Electra at the tomb of Agamemnon,' a well established composition in Southern Italian vase painting and tomb sculpture. The compositions are so close that scholars have had difficulties in distinguishing the subjects from each others on Etruscan urns, *e.g.* the Copenhagen Purni urn has almost invariably been interpreted as Cacū and the Vibennas.



Fig. 6. Cacu captured by the Vipina brothers, Chiusine alabaster urn from the Purni tomb, ca. 210-180 BC. Florence MA 74233 (from Cateni and Fiaschi 1984:pl. iv)

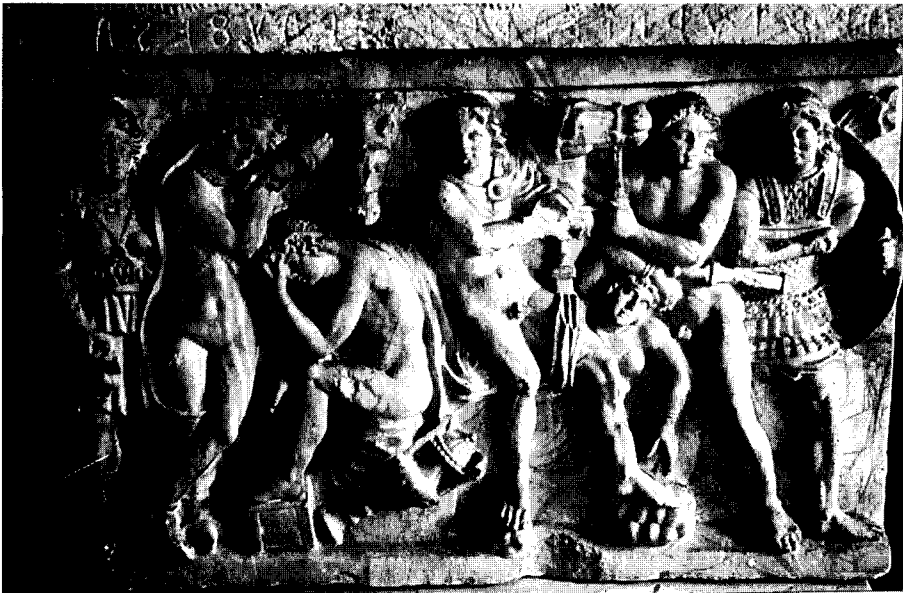


Fig. 7. Oresteia in one glimpse, Chiusine alabaster urn from the Purni tomb, ca. 210-180 BC. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, H.I.N. 61 (photo Marjatta Nielsen)

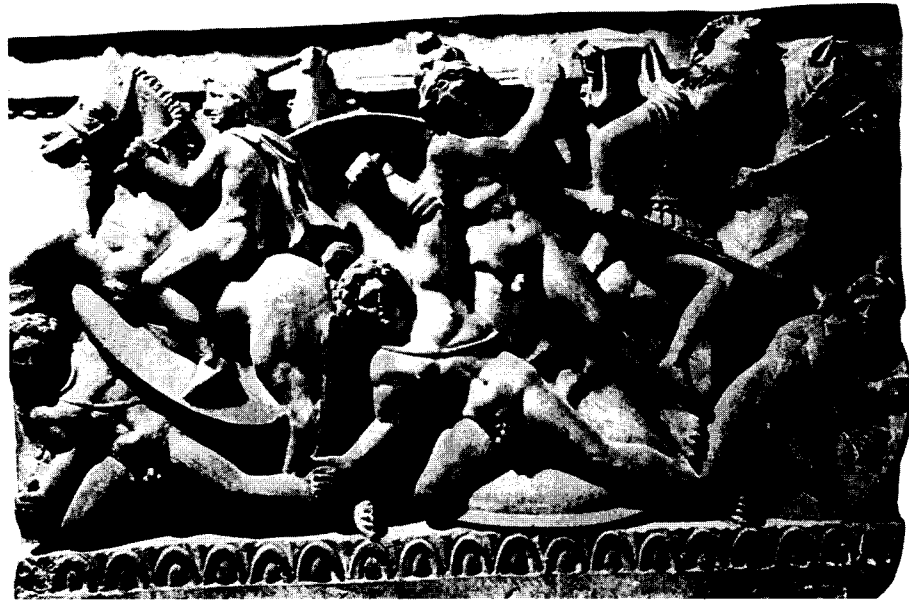


Fig. 8. Battle scene, Chiusine alabaster urn from the Purni tomb, ca. 210-180 BC. Florence MA 74232 (from Cateni and Fiaschi 1984:pl. vii)

plans of revenge, put into his mind by Apollon. The future developments of the story are told to the right. The sword which Apollon is 'casually' leaning on, points towards the breast of Clytaimnestra, who is foreseeing her own death in a nightmare—at least this Sophoclean version of the story fits best to the scene.⁴⁹ Again an example of how different time levels, past, present and future, were expressed in a single scene.⁵⁰

The third relief making part of the iconographical program of the Purni tomb gives a generic battle-scene (Fig. 8), with many loans from 'a heroic battle' involving an Alexander-like hero.⁵¹ Here, we might be dealing with any adversaries against each others—only one of the heroes is cuirassed and therefore 'civilised.' In

49 Else it is Euripides and his Hellenistic and Roman followers who gave the subjects to Etruscan urn reliefs, e.g. Brunn and Körte 1-2 (1870-96). All kinds of versions and specific moments of the story of the murder of Agamemnon and what followed were common subjects on Etruscan cinerary urns in the second century BC, reflecting the popularity of the theme also in Hellenistic and early Roman theatre, cf. Massa-Pairault 1985, 1992, Nielsen 1993.

50 The predictions and their fulfilment have been doubled in the relief of another Chiusine urn at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (Nielsen 1996a:no. 31), for which I have now presented a new interpretation, 'Hecabe's and Cassandra's predictions about Paris' fate and the outburst of the Trojan war' (Nielsen 2000). In recent years the multiple time levels in Etruscan art have been increasingly recognised, e.g. Harari 1995, De Puma 1998.

51 Florence MA 74232, e.g. Pairault 1985:pl. 26.

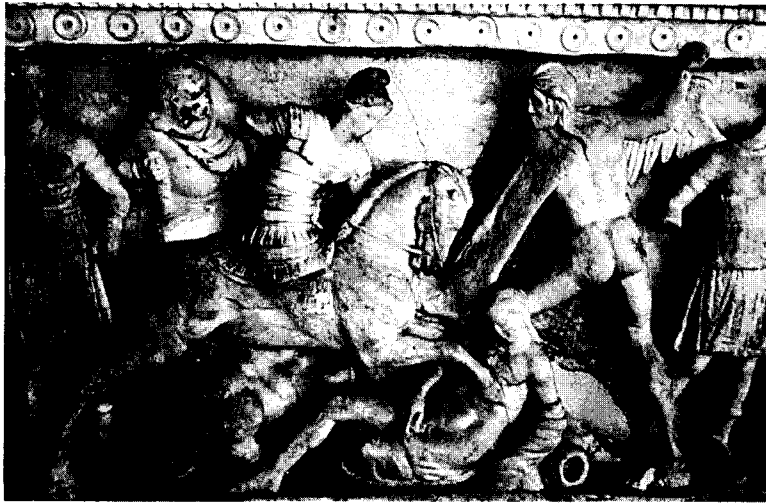


Fig. 9. Galatomachia, alabaster urn from Volterra, ca. 180-150 BC. Volterra, Museo Guarnacci 427 (photo Marjatta Nielsen)



Fig. 10. Centauromachia, alabaster urn from Volterra, ca. 180-150 BC. Volterra, Museo Guarnacci 291 (photo Marjatta Nielsen)



Fig. 11. Death of Myrtilus, alabaster urn from Volterra, ca. 150-130 BC. Florence MA 93484 (from Cateni and Fiaschi 1984:pl. xii)

the third and second centuries (and later on) there was an endless row of wars and battles that involved also Etruscans, but in Etruscan representations we can never identify Romans (after all the only serious threat) as enemies—or Punes, for that sake, if we consider Etruscans by now as loyal allies to the Romans. Only ‘civilisation against barbarism.’

On some other urns from the same Purni tomb the adversaries are more precisely described, and they turn out to be Celts, old neighbours and at times even allies to the Etruscans, but turned to enemies, thanks to Roman interference.⁵² The gigantic Celtic warriors followed already in the second century BC the description later on canonised by Tacitus. The Celts became the very symbols of the inexorable, but honourable death, and Galatomachia became a standard motif in Etruscan funerary art (Fig. 9). The Celts simply inherited the role of Centaurs (Fig. 10) and wild beasts as those who disturbed the order created by gods and men, and appearing for centuries in the iconographic programs of the Siphnian treasury, of the Parthenon and elsewhere in the Greek world. Historical events got mythical character (cf. Graf 1993), while Greek myth was used as a metaphor for historical events: they were interchangeable.

The second century saw Greek myths as the overwhelming majority of the subject matter on Etruscan urns⁵³—as well as that of tragedy literature in Rome. The

52 Nielsen 1996b, with refs. About Celtic questions in Italy, see also Bandelli 1988, Dobesch 1992.

53 E.g. contributions in *Caratteri dell'ellenismo nelle urne etrusche* 1977, Massa-Pairault 1985, 1992; Nielsen 1993.



Fig. 12. *The Seven at the walls of Thebes, staged in front of the Porta all'Arco at Volterra, ca. 40-30 BC. Volterra, Museo Guarnacci 371 (from Laviosa 1965:no. 29)*

'Death of Myrtilus' on a Volterranean urn relief (Fig. 11; Massa-Pairault 1996:6) may serve as a visual expression of this 'raving Hellenism', a trend which continued down to the early first century BC. No wonder, then, that after 80 BC, when Sulla's siege of Volterra was in fresh mind, one of the recurrent relief motifs was 'the Seven against Thebes' (Nielsen 1993:339). Again, Greek myth served as a reference to contemporary events.

Volterra remained the last Etruscan stronghold of political and cultural resistance against the Romans. In 41 BC, Perugia had been besieged and conquered by Octavian, who ritually sacrificed 300 local noblemen, thus 'referring' to the old Etruscan—and mythical Greek—custom of treating war prisoners (of which we already have seen examples). After that, the last Perugine urn-sculptors seem to have become unemployed and moved on to Volterra, where Etruscans were still living and dying in the old Etruscan way (Nielsen 1989). One of the Perugine masters probably made a relief, being quite specific when describing the walls of Thebes: he furnished the city gate with three heads, similar to the still extant city-gate of Volterra (Fig. 12). So, Greek myth served not only as a frame of reference

for the civilised man in general, but it also gave a self-identification as being an Etruscan.

However, the Romans and Augustus finally did get their will and convinced also the last Etruscans to join the big cause. The Greek myths disappeared even from Volterra, as did accomplished artists, and Rome dictated the models for art and architecture. By now, however, also Rome had been thoroughly impregnated by Greek art and culture (*cf.* Hölscher 1993).

With this rapid survey of symbolical uses of Greek myth as ‘parallel stories’ among the Etruscans, I have tried to show that, when studying Classical Antiquity and its inheritance, we should not understand the Etruscans (or other pre-Roman peoples) as blind alleys not worth a closer look, just because their languages, and therefore, their literature, have vanished. The archaeological evidence from pre-Roman Italy shows that long before the Romans conquered the Greek world, Greek culture and myth had voluntarily been adopted, thoroughly understood, and adapted to suit local cultural needs, thus paving the way for their success—and further symbolical uses—in the Roman world and in later European civilisation.

* Additional note: When the article was in second proofs, the reassessment of the Verrucchio tomb and throne appeared: *Guerriero e sacerdote. Autorità e comunità del ferro a Verrucchio. La Tomba del Trono*, Patrizia von Eles (ed.). Firenze 2002. The tomb belonged to an adult male and has to be dated already to the early orientalisising period, ca. 700 BC. The carvings on the throne are not strictly symmetrical. In the lower register the persons in the centre, between the warriors, have back-braids, *i.e.* women, as well as the one sitting on the wagon to the right. On the left-hand wagon a woman is holding the jar in balance. In the upper register, the duck motifs belong to the construction of the looms. Consequently, there are many changes to the ‘picture of the world’ given here.

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