

## Etruscan themes in Michelangelo's *New Sacristy*: Reflections of a Medici Myth

It is well known amongst scholars that there was a conscious effort to study and duplicate the art of antiquity in Renaissance Italy. While most of Italy looked to the ancient Romans for inspiration, the people of Tuscany focused on the Etruscans. As Renaissance Tuscany became increasingly unified under Florentine control, the politicians and scholars of the region began to formulate a myth of Tuscan unity based on a shared Etruscan origin. Annio da Viterbo (1432-1502) made the most notable contribution to this myth in his work *Antiquitates* (1498) in which he claimed the Etruscans (and therefore all Tuscans) were descendants of Noah, who sailed to Italy after the great flood and adopted the Latin name Janus. His work gave Tuscany a political and religious importance equal to that of the Roman Empire or the Holy Land (Schoonhoven, 2010; DeGrummond, 1986). This dynamic myth was especially utilized by the Medici family to enforce their political dominance and had a major influence on Medici sponsored art and architecture of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This paper will examine Etruscan influence on Michelangelo's sculpture in the New Sacristy in the Medici Chapel in San Lorenzo.

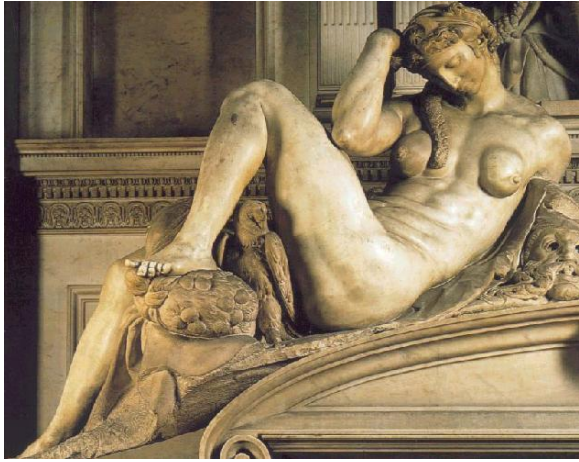
Michelangelo in particular seems to have drawn from Etruscan art in his sculpture. Evidence suggests that he was well acquainted with Etruscan urns and sarcophagi and may have even explored Etruscan tombs and studied Etruscan tomb paintings (DeGrummond, 1986). The Medici were great patrons of Michelangelo and he even lived in the Medici household for five years, suggesting he would have been well familiar with the Medici-Etruscan myth (Paoletti, 1992). Michelangelo's New Sacristy sculpture and architecture in the Medici Chapel in San Lorenzo bear clear Etruscan influence. The involvement of Cardinal Giulio de' Medici (1478-1534) and Leo X (1475-1521) in this project, including instructing Michelangelo to change his plan for the tomb arrangement in the sacristy, suggests that the work was not simply important in

terms of honoring the four famous Medici who were to be buried there but was also important as a political statement (Chiarelli, 1971).

This paper considers the specific Etruscan themes and motifs in the New Sacristy and relates them to the Medici-Etruscan myth being circulated in Florence at the time of their creation. It focuses especially on the resemblance of Michelangelo's statuary personifying the times of day to reclining Etruscan funerary sculpture and on the statues of the two seated *Dukes* above the Medici tombs which resemble Etruscan depictions of grave guardians called *lasas* (Weil-Garris Posner, 1973). It also comments on Michelangelo's unique architectural vocabulary that he used in the sacristy which could have been an attempt to create the Etruscan style described by Vitruvius in *De Architectura*, a text familiar to Michelangelo (Elam, 2005). The *New Sacristy* remains one of the best examples of the Medici family's Etruscan fascination and how that fascination manifested itself in the artwork of the artists they patronized.



(Figure 1: *Evening* and *Dawn*, Michelangelo)



(Figure 2: *Night*, Michelangelo)



(Figure 3: Hellenistic sarcophagus (no inv. #), Etruscan,

Museo Archeologico, Florence)



(Figure 4: Hellenistic Sarcophagus (no inv. #),

Etruscan, Museo Archeologico, Florence)

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