

Etruscan Social Structure: Banqueting Imagery on Greek Ceramics

The field of Etruscan studies has undergone a dramatic shift in methodological approaches to material culture in the context of the wider Mediterranean world in the last two decades. Past scholarship has predominately viewed Etruscan culture through a Greek or Roman lens given that this is the source of much of our textual references to Etruscan culture. As a result, Etruscans are commonly viewed as passive imitators of Greek culture up to the period when they can be designated as Romans. It has been widely established in recent scholarship that literary sources from outside cultures are better suited for examining the intrinsic biases of that respective culture and not for examining the cultures they purport to describe (Izzet, 2007). Thus, a more recently proposed holistic study of Etruscans and their relationships with their Mediterranean counterparts has served to assign a greater agency to Etruscans in their trade relationships with the surrounding world.

Substantial scholarship has focused on banqueting imagery on Greek style ceramics in Etruria and have been presented utilizing various approaches to material culture. Previous generations of archaeologists posited that the presence of such a multitude of foreign materials in Etruscan contexts naturally implied the superiority of foreign goods over locally made Etruscan materials. It has recently been argued that foreign cultural materials, such as Greek ceramics, were imported into Etruria in considerable numbers not because Etruscans wanted to adopt or imitate Greek culture but rather because the materials served a specific purpose and function within Etruscan society where they were assigned meaning independent from their foreign origin (Gunter, 2016).

Through the lens of surface study, as most notably applied to Etruscan cultural materials by Izzet, this paper aims to present the visual representation of banqueting scenes on ceramics of Greek form as an example of Etruscanization of foreign materials, rather than Hellenization of Etruscan culture (Izzet, 2007). Furthermore, such ceramics in Etruscan funerary contexts define spatial boundaries in Etruscan culture and thus define elite identity within communities, as has been observed about Etruscan tombs more broadly (Riva, 2010). The objective of this paper is to contribute to the reframing of Etruscan trade relations with other Mediterranean peoples, particularly the Greeks, by analyzing how the Etruscans displayed Greek ceramics with banqueting imagery in tombs and how this reflects distinctions of status between elite and non-elite members of the community as viewers of ceramics.

Bibliography

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