Epilepsy and Etruscan Religious Practice

The inhabitants of the classical world generally regarded epilepsy with fear and suspicion. They attributed a divine origin to this disease and sometimes ascribed seizures to a divine presence taking hold of the afflicted.[[1]](#footnote-1) Hippocrates, the most well-known ancient medical author, sought to dispel this common misconception in his text, *On the Divine Madness*.[[2]](#footnote-2) This disease also gripped the minds of the Romans, and it is likely that epilepsy afflicted several famous Romans including the dictator Julius Caesar and the emperor Caligula. [[3]](#footnote-3) We are not limited, though, to Greek and Roman evidence for the classical perception of this disease, and I would argue that the Etruscans possessed a keen interest in its nature and effects. In this paper, I examine literary, archaeological, and artistic evidence in order to achieve a further understanding of this remarkable disease and to reconstruct an Etruscan interpretation of its nature.

To appreciate the Etruscan perspective on this disease, we should begin with one of their most important myths, that of the Etruscan prophet Tages. This figure was a young boy, who sprang forth from the earth possessing wisdom beyond his years. He is said to have instructed the Etruscans in religious matters and the art of divination, a skill central to Etruscan cultural identity. The tale of Tages is recorded by several ancient authors: Cicero in the *De Divinatione,* Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, and Joannes Lydus in his *De Ostentis*.[[4]](#footnote-4) Due to the dearth of Etruscan literature, we must turn to artistic evidence found on an Etruscan mirror from Tuscania for one of their own versions of this story.[[5]](#footnote-5) Recent archaeological excavations at Pian di Civita, Tarquinia, which include the discovery of a child’s skeleton that indicates signs of epilepsy, have also been associated with this mythological figure. It is thus possible that the origin of Tages, and his revelation of the *Etruscan Disciplina*, can be traced to a young boy afflicted by epilepsy.[[6]](#footnote-6)

I would like to add several other Etruscan mirrors to the list of evidence associated with this disease. These mirrors depict a scene in which the Etruscan goddess Menerva engages in the curious act of dipping babies into what appears to be a krater full of wine. I submit that the Etruscan Menerva, a goddess particularly suited for medicinal rituals, the care of young men, and even oracular powers, is testing the health of these babies[[7]](#footnote-7) by submerging them in pure, undiluted wine. This “baby-dipping” practice was known to the Greeks,[[8]](#footnote-8) and it is quite likely that these mirrors contain an artistic representation demonstrating its use in Etruria. It is also possible that this interpretation of Menerva as a medicinal goddess linked to wine and youths may be used to explain two other puzzling Etruscan mirrors bearing the figures Esia and Epiur.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In each of these instances, the Etruscans seem to have revered those afflicted by epilepsy. Epilepsy was widely misunderstood and terrifying, but the Etruscans may have held those who possessed it in higher regard than did other cultures. The often cited trope that the Etruscans were the “most religious” of men,[[10]](#footnote-10) may hold true yet again, and those men and women afflicted by epilepsy were likely revered as messengers of the gods revealing their will to the Etruscans. Furthermore, it may be that the Etruscans, whose religion was primarily a revealed one, had adapted and borrowed Greek medicinal practice in order to identify those who possessed the disease at an early age. At least for the Etruscans, this disease was likely to remain sacred.

**Select Bibliography**

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1. Hipp. Sacred Disease. suggests a wide range of deities including Apollo, Poseidon, Hekate, or even Ares. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For the purposes of this paper, I shall not treat the problems surrounding Hippocrates’ identity and theories. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Suet. *Vit. Caes.* 42.1; Suet. *Vit. Cai*. 50.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ovid *Met.* 15.552-9, Cic. *De Div*. 2.23, John Lyd. *de Ostentis* 2.6.B. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Torelli 1988, fig. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. de Grummond 2006, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I confine my theory to isolating the nature of Menerva’s action and not fully explaining the meaning of the inscriptions labeling the babies on these mirrors. A convincing explanation of the babies’ names has been proposed by Nancy de Grummond in her article “Maris the Etruscan Genius.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Plut. *Vit.* *Lyc.* 16.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Esia mirror, de Grumm 106, Epiur 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Livy *Ab Urb. C.* 5.1.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)