

Guarding the Underworld: The Warrior and Hippocampus Motif in Etruscan, Lucanian, and Roman Art

The motif of a warrior confronting or battling a hippocampus found in Etruscan, Lucanian, and Roman funerary art has so far eluded definitive interpretation. In these scenes a warrior on foot or horseback faces a large scale hippocampus. He is identified as a warrior because he is male and armed, sometimes directly attacking the monster. In a Lucanian example from Paestum he wears a contemporary tri-lobe breastplate found in Lucanian tombs of the same period and is armed with a bow and spear. In an Etruscan example from Chiusi the mounted warrior carries a sword. This motif doesn't seem to belong to the categories of funerary games or rituals, elite activities from this life, or historical events that all appear on these tombs. Falling outside of the categories of symbolic representation of status, piety, or life events, it needs another explanation. A few scholars have suggested that it represents a lost folktale. This is an intriguing if unprovable hypothesis, but the evidence seems to suggest that it is not the case. The complete lack of consistent iconography seen in wide variations in dress, weaponry, and mounted status argue that representing a particular story is unlikely. The vast majority of scholars view the scene as a variation of the journey to the underworld or afterlife (Boosen 1986). Most see the hippocampus as the conveyance on the journey to the land of the dead, which is thought to have been (at least partially) over water for the Etruscans (Shepard 1940, de Grummond 2006). Parallels to the hippocampi in the company of Poseidon in Greek art or the use of one as a steed by the Phoenician god, Melqart, are also suggested as influences or references. One scholar argues that the hippocampi "served the function in Etruscan imagery of psychopompi, guides for the dead." (Jannot 2005). Neither view of them as conveyance or guide takes into account the combative nature of the motif. Whether Vanth or Hermes none of

the imagery of the guides to the underworld shows them under attack by those souls they are leading.

I propose instead that the hippocampi represent a trial or monstrous obstacle on the journey to the underworld and that the warrior represents the deceased. The motif of monstrous obstacle on the path to the underworld is well known in other ancient cultures, including Cerberus in Greek mythology, the scorpion men encountered by Gilgamesh, and the many monsters that faced Egyptians including the three serpents Am-awa, Sekhabesnfubeb, and Aqebi. The evidence for Etruscans facing monstrous obstacles on the way to the afterlife is found throughout their funerary art. In the Tomb of the Bulls (530 BC) a warrior armed with a spear is mounted on a horse that gallops toward a winged lion. It resembles Assyrian Lammasu figures who guarded doorways and may here guard one entrance to the afterlife. Lions and sphinxes are found at another tomb at Cerveteri where they are positioned to guard the door to the afterlife in the company of demons (Scheffer 1993). Hippocampi are also found with demons (Pallottino 1975) and a triple serpent threatening the route to the underworld in the Tomb of the Infernal Chariot, Sarteano, near Siena (de Grummond 2006). That the warriors at Chiusi and the Tomb of the Bulls are identical in dress but not weaponry indicates that they are the consistent element and likely symbolic representations of the deceased facing various monsters on the journey to the afterlife. The Tomb of the Blue Demons clearly shows a boat for the water journey while none of the hippocampi are ridden by the deceased in any Etruscan funerary art. I conclude that we must consider the hippocampi along with the demons and serpents as monstrous obstacles to the afterlife and the particular one that faced the deceased as they embark on the watery part of the journey.

Bibliography

Monika Boosen, *Etruskische Meeresmischwesen: Untersuchungen zur Typologie u. Bedeutung*

(*Archaeologica* 59). Bretschneider, 1986.

Nancy de Grummond, *Etruscan Myth, Sacred History, and Legend*. University of Pennsylvania

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2006.

Jean-René Jannot, *Religion in Ancient Etruria*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.

Massimo Pallottino, *The Etruscans*. Indiana University Press, 1975.

Charlotte Scheffer, 'The Arched Door in Late Etruscan Funerary Art' in *Murlo and the*

Etruscans: Art and Society in Ancient Etruria. edited by Richard Daniel De Puma,

Jocelyn Penny Small, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.

Katharine Shepard, *The Fish-Tailed Monster in Greek and Etruscan Art*. Bryn Mawr

Dissertation, 1940.