

## First in Flight: A Comprehensive Study of Etruscan Winged “Demons”

The Etruscans were an indigenous Italic tribe of people who inhabited West Central Italy in an area roughly bounded by the Po River in the north and the River Tiber in the south. Identified through material cultural remains from as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, they remained an autonomous people until the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, when the final Roman conquest of the Italic peninsula absorbed the Etruscans under the yolk of Rome. The Etruscans are known primarily through their funerary remains and vast cemeteries. Their cities and habitation sites, long buried for over two millennia by continuous human occupation, in large part remain untouched. What survive are the tombs consisting of large underground rooms decorated in the same manner as their homes (often painted) and full of objects for the deceased to take into the afterlife (Naso 2010).

Targeted examination of specific images and iconography found on painted tomb walls has resulted in a better understanding of Etruscan culture, religion, and society (Steingräber 2006; Torelli 1999; Pieraccini *forthcoming*). However, many questions still remain, particularly ones concerned with religion and the Underworld. Some of the most fascinating images are the so-called winged demons of death featured not only on tomb walls, but also on carved stone relief, vase painting and sculpture. Etruscan inscriptions identify some of these winged figures as Charun, Vanth, and Tuchulcha (Bonfante 2006). Attributes, like Charun’s mallet, Vanth’s torch, and Tuchulcha’s menacing serpents, help us to identify these figures on the walls of tombs without inscriptions; such as the Tomb of the Blue Demons at Tarquinia, the Francois Tomb at Vulci, and the Golini I Tomb at Orvieto, just to name a few (De Grummond 2006). To date, no complete study focuses specifically on these winged demons, nor have scholars examined them

as a group, namely wall painting and the contemporary comparanda found in sculpture and vase painting.

Some scholars have proposed that despite their menacing features, these demons were in fact benevolent rather than sinister (Krauskopf 2006; Jannot 2005; Pieraccini & Del Chiaro 2013). Perhaps they aided the deceased in their transition to the afterlife. Depictions of these winged figures often feature them alongside the deceased—as if they were a vital part of the deceased’s journey to the Underworld. A comprehensive study of how these winged demons functioned in their funerary context is needed. Are these figures apotropaic in some way—warding off evil for the deceased as well as their family members who performed funerary rituals to honor their loved ones? How are the wall paintings, vase paintings and sculpted works similar or dissimilar? Inscriptions allow us to identify three winged demons—perhaps there are more figures that have yet to be identified? Having spent the summer in west central Italy examining first hand the wall paintings from the painted tombs at Tarquinia, combined with supplementary research of unpublished contents of excavated tombs housed in the storerooms of the Banditaccia Necropolis at Cerveteri, I have begun to address many of these questions. I would argue that not only are these winged figures operating as guides for the deceased into the underworld, but in fact are distinct markers of an indigenous Italic mythological tradition independent from the Greek pantheon the Etruscans, and later Romans, are known to have adapted.

## Bibliography

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