

Redeeming Etruscan Women and Theopompus: Finding Virtue in the Source and Subject.

The 4th century BC Greek historian Theopompus, quoted by Athenaeus, wrote the longest surviving account of Etruscan social life. The passage is replete with details of social and sexual customs alien if not deliberately shocking to his Greek readers. Among the well-known descriptions are women dining at banquets, public and promiscuous intercourse, and indifference to paternity. Because of its clear bias, the passage is generally dismissed as a useful source on Etruscan women and their lives. Larissa Bonfante (2013), for example, wrote that “there are all the standard charges and clichés of Greek *truphe* or Roman *luxuria*.” In this paper I argue, however, that the passage, stripped of its moralizing tone, provides valuable corroborative testimony on the lives of Etruscan women, and - far from living for pleasure alone - Etruscan women played important if not central roles in domestic, social, religious, and agricultural spheres. In the interests of time, I’ll focus on the religious and agricultural roles.

Concerning public intercourse Theopompus writes “It is no disgrace for them to do anything in the open, or to be seen having it done to them ...” Remarkably we have support for that statement, though the circumstances are very restricted. Wall paintings in the Tomba dei Tori and Tomba della fustigazione show erotic pairs and groups involved in public intercourse. All of these activities take place outdoors, sustaining Theopompus’ statement. These, however, represent a very specific form of religious ritual, one not unique to the Etruscans. In each instance these people are participating in rites of fertility using sympathetic magic. The couples performing intercourse are doing so to promote the fertility of the fields for the upcoming growing season. Greek parallels for elements of sympathetic agrarian magic include the Thesmophoria and the Hieros Gamos of Demeter and Iasion, which Hesiod describes as taking place in a thrice-turned furrow. If the Etruscans act comparably to these and other Near Eastern

parallels it seems virtually certain that these images depict priests and priestesses acting on behalf of the entire community.

Finally, the redemption of my title. Theopompus may be moralizing, but his general description corresponds to the visual sources. These women, however, are participating in a major religious ritual to ensure a successful grain harvest. Both source and subject display virtues: one historical accuracy and the other socially-based religious observance.

Bibliography

Bonfante, Larissa (2013). Mothers and Children. In Turfa, Jean MacIntosh, ed. *The Etruscan World*. Pp. 426-446. London; New York: Routledge.