

## Games of Chance and Skill: Seeking Meaning in Etruscan Play

Archaeologists analyze material culture in order to help approach a reconstruction of the past. Some aspects of the past, including performance activities, are ephemeral and, consequently, remain much more elusive. The term “performance” includes a wider range of human activities than those occurring only in a theater; other types of behaviors understood as performance may include ritual, play, and a variety of roles enacted in everyday life (Schechner 2002, 2). The focus of this paper will be on examining examples of Etruscan play; play has been chosen here as the central focus of study because it offers information about cultural values, experiences, structures, and relationships. A reconstruction of play may be pursued through an examination of iconographic representations, architectural spaces, as well as other types of physical evidence.

Play has long been associated with performance in scholarly analyses of the subject in that play and performance overlap in several key ways. According to Schechner, like performance, “play is very hard to pin down or define. It is a mood, an activity, an eruption of liberty; sometimes it is rule-bound, sometimes very free” (Schechner 2002, 79). Scholars must also consider two other theorists, Caillois and Huizinga, whose contributions have influenced the studies of play the most. Huizinga, in his foundational work, *Homo Ludens*, claims that there are universal characteristics of play. Huizinga established qualities of play activity, which sociologist Caillois modified and expounded upon in *Man, Play and Games*.

This paper will examine the Etruscan iconographic record for evidence regarding play activities and games. The focus of this paper will be confined to two of Caillois’ play categories, *agon* and *alea*, or games of skill and games of chance, respectively. *Alea*, or games of chance, in which the outcome of the game is largely independent of the actions of the player, is the category

of gaming that has the greatest paucity of evidence in Etruscan archaeology. Regardless, the types of evidence included in this category of gaming include dice, knucklebones, gaming boards, and iconographic representations of the equipment and their use in mirror decoration and relief sculpture. Etruscan examples of *alea* show strong relationships to Etruscan religious activities associated with divination and with fate.

The term *agon* refers to games in which the players directly influence the outcome through skill, experience, speed, strength and other such attributes. They are the most commonly depicted type of play performed in Etruscan iconography, most frequently in the form of athletic events. Additionally, agonistic events may be identified in a wide variety of iconographic media, including relief sculpture, tomb paintings, engraved gems, vase painting, engraved mirrors, and bronze statuettes.

A comparison of the two categories of *alea* and *agon* offer a means to explore otherwise ephemeral Etruscan cultural activities. Questions considered here include: What are the roles of *alea* and *agon* in Etruscan society and how do these types of games express cultural values? What aspects of play and games are considered important by Etruscan artists? What is the relationship between spectator and participant? Who are the participants? What was the possible Greek influence on play and game iconography (especially concerning athletics) and how was it adapted for Etruscan purposes? An exploration of these questions will allow for a closer examination of Etruscan cultural performances that are not otherwise evident in the archaeological record.

## Bibliography

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Huizinga, J. 1960. *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Schechner, R. 2002. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.