

The Afterlife in Etruria: New Approaches to Funerary Evidence

Much of our understanding of Etruscan culture derives, in one form or another, from funerary evidence: grave goods offer information about social stratification, gender roles, and even Etruria's place in pan-Mediterranean trading networks; tomb paintings inform us about religion and ritual, attesting not just to funerary practice but to divination and augury; the architecture of tombs provides key evidence for the design and evolution of early Italic houses. Yet often we work so hard to extract information about Etruscan history and society from this evidence that we tend to overlook its funerary nature -- namely, that remains from tombs, urns, and sarcophagi attest not just to cultural norms but to the specific choices made by individuals when preparing their family members (or themselves) for the afterlife. All of our panelists, in different ways, approach funerary evidence with an eye to exploring it, first and foremost, as reflective of beliefs about and attitudes to the afterlife.

Our panel's first paper, "Ceremonial Cloth: The Representation of Textiles in Etruscan Funerary Imagery," looks at the abundant imagery of textiles as they are represented in Etruscan funerary contexts. Rather than viewing these depictions simply as a means of reconstructing Etruscan garments from daily life, this paper focuses on images where textiles function as something other than clothing, such as coverings or offerings. The author suggests that the visual prominence of cloth in funerary scenes may refer to a specific role that textiles played in social ceremonies such as marriages and funerals. Our second paper, "From the Battlefield to the Tomb" addresses the Etruscan predilection for including panoplies of armor in the tombs of wealthy men. Though Etruscan weaponry was once considered important solely because it might shed light on the adoption of

hoplite warfare outside Greece, this paper offers another perspective: weapons and armor from Etruscan mortuary contexts also open a window into elite male identity, and how the construction of ‘the warrior’ differed from region to region. Together these two papers offer new insight on how even daily-use items, when included in funerary assemblages, shifted to adopt ritual meanings and functions in the afterlife.

Our panelists then move to consider how we may better employ archaeological evidence to nuance our understanding of the mythology and theology of the Etruscan afterlife – a particularly elusive topic, given the dearth of literary evidence from the period. Our third paper, “Trade, Value, and Ritual: The Life and Times of a Krater by the Niobid Painter from Perugia”, addresses one of the most common and best-studied type of Etruscan funerary offerings: imported Greek figurative pottery. The authors offer an ‘object history’ of a krater made by the Niobid painter, c. 450 BCE, which travelled widely and had a hundred-year history of use before its deposition in an Etruscan tomb, dated to roughly 350 BCE. The creation of a bronze cover, locally made and with figurative decoration, transformed the krater’s function and symbolism at this phase of its use, adapting it to serve as a cinerary urn. This rich context supports a new reading of the iconography of the vase, which at once could be read as reflecting the Greek myth of Persephone *and* as relating to the Etruscan deities Aita and Phersipnei.

Our next two papers, in different ways, turn to Etruscan depictions of the deities of the underworld. Despite their ubiquity in funerary art, Etruscan death demons remain poorly understood because they lack clear counterparts in Greek and Roman cultural practice. “Demonic or Divine: Exploring the Role of Vanth in Etruscan Art” argues that though the winged figures, common in funerary arts of many media, were once

considered to be the equivalents of furies, they were likely intended to be viewed as benevolent. Like the Greek Hekate, the Etruscan figure of Vanth assisted the transition from life to death for an individual, accompanying the deceased to the underworld and aiding them along the way. Our final paper, too, investigates the figures of demons in the Etruscan afterworld, by focusing on the gendered representation of their biological sex. The author argues that past work has too readily ascribed Etruscan demons to a binary male/female divide, drawing on artistic conventions for representing bodies more typical of Greek and Roman culture. Closer attention reveals that most demons were neither male nor female, neither human nor animal. This liminality allowed them to serve as mediators between the worlds of the living and the world of the dead, functioning as the psychopomps who guided the deceased to the chthonic realm of the underworld.