

Demonic or Divine: Exploring the Role of Vanth in Etruscan Art

William Bates, in his discussion of an Etruscan bronze mirror depicting the purification of Orestes now in Philadelphia, deduces that the female figure labeled Vanth is an Etruscan version of a Greek Fury (Bates 1911, 463). Considering the subject matter of the mirror and the snake wrapped around Vanth's right arm, the association between Vanth and the Furies is not unreasonable. Since Bates' interpretation, Vanth has continually been associated with the Greek goddesses of vengeance; however, the context in which Vanth most often appears in art is not in character with either the Furies or any other demonic figure. In fact, the use of the modern idiom "Death Demons" to describe chthonic divinities such as Vanth and Charun in Etruscan art has caused modern scholars to interpret these figures in a negative light.

Unlike the Greek Furies, Vanth is typically associated with the dead or dying. On the three vases of the Vanth Group in Orvieto, she appears holding a scroll as she follows Hades to greet the newly arrived deceased. In the François Tomb, she awaits the souls of the sacrificed Trojan youth. Vanth, alongside Charun, can also appear as Hades' gate keeper and as a guide of the dead. The Greek Furies, on the other hand, haunt the living; their role in mythology is perhaps more in line with Tuchulcha, the monstrous figure who threatens the imprisoned Theseus in the Tomb of Orcus II at Tarquinia. The incorrect association between Vanth and the infernal Erinyes of Greek art has perpetuated a misunderstanding of the role of Vanth in Etruscan religion and the incorrect labeling of her as a death demon rather than a chthonic divinity. Since Vanth appears to be benevolent rather than malevolent in Etruscan art, I argue a more reasonable comparison is with the Greek goddess of the crossways, Hekate.

Hekate is described in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (439-440) as Persephone's agent and personnel confidant, closely associating her with the underworld. She oversees points of

transition, including birth and death. In the fifth century B.C.E., she appears on Attic vases leading Persephone back from Hades. A century later when Vanth becomes popular in Etruscan art, Hekate simultaneously appears on South Italian Greek vases as a guide to the underworld. While Vanth is arguably not an exact replica of her Greek counterpart Hekate, the cultural exchange between the Greeks and Etruscans especially in the areas of art and religion suggests that there is much to learn from a careful comparison of these two chthonic divinities in art.

Bibliography

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