

## Crossing Boundaries: A Gendered Reinterpretation of Etruscan Demons

Although epigraphic evidence attests to the existence of the winged death-goddess, Vanth, as early as the seventh century B.C.E., figurative depictions of other Etruscan demons were not common until the fourth century. Thereafter, demons played a variety of different roles in the Etruscan funerary record. Their portrayal as chthonic beings is seen when they are integrated into Greek mythological narratives in tomb paintings, funerary statuary and cinerary urns. Demons also performed a psychopomp role in tomb paintings and on sarcophagi, where they are often shown alongside Etruscan elites, as on the long front panel of the Sarcophagus of Arnth Tetnies and Ramtha Vishnai, c. 450-400. Standing in the center, Tetnies is present leaning on a walking stick. Standing to his left is his wife, Ramtha Vishnai (Rowland 2008). On the left short side of this same sarcophagus, Vishnai is shown again riding in a horse led cart as she is being greeted by a female demon. Presumably, one can imagine how Tetnies and Vishnai became reunited due to the intervention of the demon herself. Finally, demons functioned as guardians of the tomb space as seen in statuary from the grave complex, Greppe Sant'Angelo in Cerveteri, as well as multiple painted depictions in tombs at Tarquinia.

The sexuality and gender of male and female demons are equally complex issues. Both male and female demons are often depicted in a manner that at once emphasizes their physical sex characteristics but destabilizes the social construction of the gendered body. For example, the figure of Vanth is often portrayed with bare breasts or with genitalia exposed. She appears female, yet the revelation of her body in this manner undermines broader cultural expectations of feminine behavior. Conversely, the physical sex of seemingly male demons, including Charun, is not as overt. Though Charun is shown in many tomb paintings with bluish or grey-green flesh, other depictions represent him with light, pinkish skin – a convention adopted in both Greek and

Etruscan art for the representation of women. Because of this, and the fact that he is sometimes shown with a clean shaven face, some scholars have suggested that Charun is either female, part female, part male or perhaps asexual (de Grummond 2006, 214). A similar debate also surrounds the gender and sex of the figure of Tuchulca, as seen in the Tomb of Orcus II, in Tarquinia. Illustrated wearing a simple chiton associated with female attire, this depiction also possesses various theriomorphic attributes, such as the beak of a large bird, the ears of a wolf or donkey and writhing snakes representing hair. Tuchulca also seems to be depicted with the suggestion of breasts, which has led many scholars to label it as a “female” figure. However, I argue that Tuchulca exhibits both male *and* female characteristics, and thus is intentionally more sexually ambiguous. The study of Etruscan death demons is further complicated by the fact that often they appear in combination. In the fourth century B.C.E. Tomb of the Anina Family at Tarquinia, for example, one may witness how physically dissimilar demon figures can be. Charun is depicted to the left of the main doorway leading into the tomb space, while Vanth is to the right. Charun is fully clothed, Vanth is not. Charun’s body, inclusive of a beak-like nose, unkempt beard, and animal ears seems to visually suggest an aggressive nature. In contrast, Vanth’s delicate wings are the only attribute that suggest her non-human status. Her light flesh is depicted as smooth, rather than mimicking Charun’s mottled skin. All of these ambiguities underscore that demons were liminal figures, existing outside the human world.

This paper does not venture to designate the perhaps impossible task of assigning a sex to all demons in Etruria. Rather, I suggest that by paying attention to the articulation of each figure’s sex and gender, or lack thereof, along with their explicit function in the funerary setting, a clearer picture of the religious role of the Etruscan demon may thus emerge. In this paper, I offer a chronologically-ordered assessment of demon figures from two specific forms of media:

sarcophagi and tomb paintings. I focus on attributes often linked to sex and gender, such as clothing, skin color and the inclusion of sexual organs. This analysis enhances our understanding of the function that each type of figure (male, female, asexual) assumes in the funerary narrative, as psychopomps or chthonic guardians. In sum, I suggest that the sexualized and gendered nuances seen in the depiction of demon figures in Etruria served to enhance each figure's function.

### Bibliography

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