

(Wo)Man in the Mirror: Reexamining the Gender of Etruscan Mirror Users Within their Tomb Contexts

Etruscan mirrors have engendered curiosity among the scholarly and public community alike since they were rediscovered in the Renaissance. Etruscan mirrors only reinforce how limited our knowledge of the Etruscans is, and they have often been the focus of scholarly attention over other types of grave goods. One particular focus of the study of Etruscan mirrors has been the gender of the users, who scholars tend to agree were female (Izzet 1998; De Grummond 1982). Identification of the gender of Etruscan mirror users, however, has been problematic, and most of the work on this topic was completed before the first major push of feminist and gender archaeology. This paper reexamines the gender of Etruscan mirror users by viewing the data through the lens of feminist and gender theory in archaeology and then contextualizing the mirrors with other grave goods rather than as individual objects (Butler 1990; Conkey and Gero 1997). By doing so, I will show that the gender of Etruscan mirror users is much more ambiguous than strictly female users in a binary gender system. The data reveals, in fact, a non-binary gender construct among Etruscan mirror users.

This paper begins by establishing a theoretical framework of gender and feminist theory and summarizes the major scholarship surrounding Etruscan mirrors and Etruscan gender. With the framework created, I then investigate the data collected through the established framework. The provenance of many Etruscan mirrors is murky and many lack an archaeological context altogether, so for this paper I only consider a subset of Etruscan mirrors which have been published with clear contextual information, which comes to a total of 111 Etruscan mirrors within 67 tombs.

Many hold that the best way to identify the gender of the tomb occupant(s) is to identify gendered artifacts within the tomb (Nelson 2004). Such has been the treatment of Etruscan mirrors, which have largely been associated with women, and therefore would belong to female tomb occupants. When examining the data, however, it is clear that most of the gender identifications relied on modern gender stereotypes and only considered a binary gender arrangement, with no differentiation between sex and gender. When modern gender theory is applied to the study of Etruscan mirrors, it reveals ambiguities and contradictions between the identified gender of the tomb and the data, with many more ambiguities than firm gender identifications. For example, several tombs contain objects gendered both male and female. In fact, most tombs in this study contain no gendered objects besides the mirror. I argue that these ambiguities reveal a non-binary gender among the Etruscan mirror users, thus showing that Etruscan mirrors are not only used by women, but by women and a non-binary gender.

Select Bibliography

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