

The Female Form in Etruria: Cultural Exchange and Cultural Distinction

The abundance of female imagery, burials, and Greco Roman texts has collectively led scholars to suggest women played a highly visible role in Etruria. These traditional sources, while useful, can easily be misinterpreted. Written sources are often considered biased and thus unreliable sources of evidence. Grave goods have been an invaluable source of information regarding gender roles in Etruria. Yet, when lacking forensic evidence, it is perhaps impossible to *read* grave goods placed in a tomb space as conclusively indicative of gender and gender identity. Etruscan imagery often includes a conglomeration of non-Etruscan based cultural iconography. Thus it becomes difficult at best to clearly ascertain any conclusive evidence based on the embedded stories seen within Etruscan figurative imagery. A question thus emerges that deserves discussion, what then of the body itself? This paper attempts to address what has often been overlooked by scholars in the analysis of Etruscan funerary and votive imagery: The female body. The male form has been presented by scholars such as Bonfante and Osborne as equally powerful as any piece of armor or clothing in Classical Athens. The high visibility of the female body, and the variety of ways in which the body is adjusted and postured in figurative Etruscan imagery clearly merits further investigation.

A chronological survey of the female body, as seen in Iron Age through Archaic period Etruscan funerary and votive imagery is presented. Utilizing the survey, I propose that a repetitive series of specific and highly purposeful positions for the female form clearly emerges. I argue that the female body was intentionally positioned to represent the Etruscan woman as a physical collaborator to her male counterparts. More notably, Etruscan states, such as Velzna and Caere utilized the female form as a powerful tool which seems to have explicitly represented and

distinguished Etruria from other ancient peoples in the Western Mediterranean (Bonfante 1989, 1994; Osborne 2011).

Works Cited

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