Art History

The Portrayal of Death and the Afterlife in Etruscan Sarcophagi

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Throughout history, different cultures have developed unique perspectives about death and the afterlife, which are often reflected in their art. For the Etruscans, death was merely the next step in life. They created impressive tombs filled with supplies that the dead would need in the afterlife. One of the most beautiful items they made for their deceased relatives was a sarcophagus cover. Generally made of terra cotta or marble, these covers portrayed some aspect of the person whose remains were placed inside. The Etruscans also often created elaborate tombs and even burial cities where they laid their relatives to rest. The way in which they treated death and their hopes of an enjoyable afterlife show many things about their culture: their religious views, their optimism in the face of death, and their respect for their ancestors. It is apparent that they believed their souls could make use of earthly possessions after they died. Sarcophagus covers show not only the cultural trends of the Etruscans but also the religious ideals which formed the basis of their society.

Archeologists have unearthed Etruscan tombs in virtually all of the heavily populated towns and cities established by the Etruscans. These tombs were usually rather elaborate. As H.H. Scullard points out, they were often carved out of the earth and were “decorated with architectural facades, thus giving to the cliffs the appearance of cities, with houses, temple-fronts, steps and streets” (Scullard 93). These tombs, which were set a short distance away from the main towns, were used by the whole town. Families, however, usually attained their own sections in which to place their ancestors. Within the tombs archaeologists have discovered, among other things, sarcophagi containing the ashes or remains of people (Scullard 93-94). Although the sarcophagi were generally quite large, they were used to house the cremated remains of individuals. Many contain small cavities where urns filled with ashes were placed (Banti 44). It is curious that the sarcophagi held only ashes because they were built much larger than necessary. Art historians are unsure about why their size does not directly match their function but speculate that size had to do with attempting to create likenesses that were somewhat lifelike and real (Banti 44-45). The Etruscans were attempting to memorialize their ancestors and create a suitable afterlife for them, so perhaps they created large sarcophagi to make the tombs appear more like life on earth.

One of the best known sarcophagus covers from the Etruscan period is that of the Reclining Couple on a Sarcophagus from Cerveteri. This cover shows a lively couple reclining together on a dining couch. The couple, presumably a husband
and wife, appear quite lively and content. The woman is holding her hand up as if welcoming the viewer into their conversation, and the husband reciprocates the gesture. Art historians believe that he once held a drinking vessel. The pose of the couple is meaningful. It appears that they may be inviting the viewer to dine with them for eternity. Both display an archaic smile and have inviting smiles and warm eyes. The cover does not seem to mourn their death but rather celebrates their lives and the happiness they enjoy in the afterlife (Stokstad 165). The couple is adorned, moreover, with fine jewelry and drapery, suggesting that they belong to the upper class. Because two people are shown on the sarcophagus, both of their ashes were placed in urns inside the coffin. The figures are meant to resemble the couple who were buried there.

Stylistically, the figures show Ionian influence (Scullard 101). They reflect some attributes of Greek figures, particularly in their archaic smiles, idealized bodies, and realistic faces. The Etruscans were heavily influenced by Greek art and used it as a model in creating their own style of art. The faces of the man and woman look similar to the faces of many contemporaneous Greek figures. Additionally, the artist captured a sense of movement in their pose; it is as if the viewer has caught the couple in the middle of a conversation. Their pose reveals an interesting aspect of their culture: men and women were able to dine together and were treated as equals (Harrel-Courtes 45). The couple appears together on the sarcophagus, indicating that they would have socialized and dined together during their lives. Unlike their Greek counterparts, Etruscan men and women spent more time together and were able to socialize with each other. Other sarcophagus covers from the Etruscan period, such as Married Couple Embracing, show the same cultural values. Here, the couple is shown in an intimate pose. They are lying on a bed, covered with a sheet, facing each other, and are embracing. Their pose evokes feelings of love and tenderness. The fact that the couple is shown together in a tender embrace suggests the importance of marriage and of a close relationship between men and women.

The Reclining Couple sarcophagus dates from the early sixth century, perhaps as early as 510 BCE, and was found in a tomb in Cerveteri, a town in southern Etruria (Banti 37). It was made of terra cotta in two separate pieces that were joined. The sarcophagus measures roughly six feet seven inches in length and sits on short legs that hold it above the ground (Stokstad 165). The sarcophagus was buried in the tombs of the town of Cerveteri. The city itself was built on an upland plain surrounded by two rivers and was situated approximately four miles inland, perhaps to protect it from pirates and unscrupulous traders (Banti 37-38). A number of tombs were built just outside the city, and the Reclining Couple Sarcophagus was found in one of them. The tombs were built into the earth by the Etruscans (Harrel-Courtes 40). Copies of the sarcophagus have been produced in the years since its excavation, but the original is housed in the Villa Giulia National Museum in Rome.

The excavation of Etruscan tombs has allowed archaeologists to gain a better understanding of the religious views held by the early Italians. Their religion was
quite similar to that of the ancient Greeks; they were polytheistic and had a variety of mystery cults. The sarcophagus covers, which portrayed people instead of gods, show that man was a central player in the afterlife and that death was more focused on man than on the gods. In fact, funerary rituals were directly concerned with the dead person, and his tomb was meant to help recreate his earthly life with all his earthly comforts to be enjoyed by his spirit (Harrel-Courtes 41). It is therefore evident that they believed that one's spirit lived on after death. Greek mystery cults were prevalent in Etruria as reflected in their tomb decorations. These mystery cults emphasized the importance of man and placed him in charge of his own life. The fresco Dancers and Diners, for example, from the Tomb of the Triclinium shows male and female figures dancing and dining in a festive setting (Stokstad 164). The fresco has a celebratory mood and portrays the afterlife as a happy existence similar to that on earth. It is apparent that while deference and offerings to the gods were important, they did not determine what happened to the soul after death. This belief is obvious in Etruscan sarcophagi because people were the main focus, not the gods. Unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition where religious symbols and images are etched onto tombstones to honor God, the Etruscans honored themselves and wanted their eternal resting place to glorify themselves.

The way in which death is dealt with in the art of the Etruscans shows a great deal about how they viewed their place in the universe and what was important to them. The fact that the figural representations of actual people were placed on the sarcophagi shows that the Etruscans placed themselves at the center of the afterlife and believed their souls could enjoy earthly comforts from beyond. They also admired the human figure because they used it, instead of images of the gods, in funerary art. The connection between people on earth and souls in the afterlife was strong to the Etruscans. Gender roles and the somewhat equal positions of the sexes are also evident in their portrayal of couples on sarcophagi. Etruscan funerary art provides details on how the Etruscans viewed their place in the universe and their religious beliefs.

Works Cited