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The Proto-Portraiture of North Etruscan Cinerary Urns and the Philosophy of Elite Self-Worth

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I. Introduction

The Etruscans did not leave behind a written philosophy on the self, but their funerary culture communicates a value placed on identity in their society. In the Orientalizing period of North Etruria, elites conveyed their status with idealized representation of themselves on cinerary urns. Due to limited outside influences, their emphasis on personhood must originate from an indigenous relationship between status and physicality that began in the Villanovan period. While the reasoning behind why they elevated their individualism with proto-portraiture is uncertain, the attention to individualization coincides with a simultaneous need for the visibility of the elite self. In the decentralized and tumultuous region of North Etruria, elites asserted their power in aristocratic networks through the recognition of their physical person, which informed their self-worth. As a result, the elite self's singularity became philosophically good and desirable in North Etruria, and their cinerary urns like the *Female Canopic Urn* (Fig. 1) and the *Lid of a Cinerary Urn* (Fig. 2) reflect the self-worth critical to their life that they wished to perpetuate in death.

II. The Villanovan Paradigm for Elite Anthropomorphized Urns

During the early Villanovan period, proto-Etruscans dressed biconical urns with bodily adornments to signify the deceased's body and their communal identity. The large two-storied urns with ceramic bowl covers represented an abstract human shape that proto-Etruscans etched textile patterns into as well as wrapped in perishable textiles to further anthropomorphize the deceased.¹ However, different urns and their affiliated burials during this period lack distinction. Anthropologist Rosemary A. Joyce argues that body ornaments broadcast the social standing of

¹ Spivey 1997, 28; Stoddart 2016, 7; Shipley 2016, 61.

independent buried persons in reference to their societal hierarchies, but the singularity of these biconical urns offers an opposite reaction.² Because the urns are symbols of their respective deceased yet employ similar decorations with few grave goods, early proto-Etruscans did not consider their status a principal part of their identity. Simon Stoddart argues that proto-Etruscans masked stratification by banning conspicuous consumption in funerary rites, but considering the stratification evident in later Villanovan burials, this is unlikely.³ Instead, the indifference over their status suggests that early Villanovan society was egalitarian, but this does not mean their burials lacked identity. While their individuality did not factor into their place in society, the uniformity of their funerary practice indicates that their distinction as an active community member took precedence. Therefore, as part of their egalitarian culture, proto-Etruscans opted for a widespread, simple custom of anthropomorphized urns to publicize their communal identity.

During the ninth and eighth centuries BCE of the late Villanovan period, proto-Etruscan urns and burials exhibit signs of social stratification and a more individualized concept of identity, particularly through the use of crested helmet-lids. These ornate ceramic or metal helmets with spiked tops replaced the ceramic bowl covers from the earlier period.⁴ Following Joyce's previous theory on status and burial ornaments, the alteration of the urn designates a change in the characterization of the deceased's selfhood. As a symbol of both a warrior and religious figure in tandem with a higher quality and quantity of grave goods, these helmet-lids denote the emergence of an aristocracy.⁵ The late-ninth- to early-eighth-century Tomb 1 burial in

² Joyce 2005, 142.

³ Stoddart 2016, 10.

⁴ Spivey 1997, 29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

the Impiccato Necropolis of Tarquinia (Fig. 3) is one such display of power and wealth. A bronze crested helmet decorated with rows of dots in repoussé covers the large biconical impasto urn, and its bronze grave goods include a staff of command, signaling the deceased's high-ranking position.⁶ This use of insignia of rank indicates that status gained a higher priority in the conceptualization of personhood during the late Villanovan period. Although elites represented their stature as a part of their physical self through cinerary urns to separate them from the lower classes, these urns did not lose their original sense of community. The maintenance of communal identity perseveres in the continuation of their anthropomorphized biconical shape. Since the community is the source of their authority, elites did not wish to remove themselves from it, but they did want to define themselves within it. They upheld their communal identity as an active member by participating in the tradition of biconical urns, and additional ornaments communicated their authority relative to their community as a justification of their status. Though a philosophy of individualism does not develop in the Villanovan period, the relation of the urn to the body and the subsequent funerary symbolism of the elite self sets a precedent for the proto-portraiture of Orientalizing North Etruscan urns.

III. Identity and Politicization of the South and North during the Orientalizing Period

As Etruria transitioned into the Orientalizing period, the early centralization of the South stabilized their political structure and made hostile displays of aristocratic identity unnecessary. Starting in the late Villanovan period, the southern centers experienced large wealth gaps via their access to rich trade routes on land and water.⁷ This surplus of wealth encouraged the synoecism of smaller areas surrounding the trade centers—either by force or natural

⁶ Haynes 2000, 13.

⁷ Torelli 1986, 51.

migration—that enabled the emergence of a limited number of dominant kinship clans.⁸ The concentration of power among the few aristocratic clans politically stabilized the region, and the success of synoecism increased the significance of these clans in their respective regions.⁹ This combination of stratification and visibility gave elites a sense of safety within their hierarchies, and so they only needed to conserve the social order. The development of the Etruscan writing system in South Etruria circa 700 BCE provided this maintenance.¹⁰ Elites employed their consolidation of literacy in the aristocratic gift-exchange system that kept them in good favor with each other.¹¹ In doing so, elites created alliances to avoid conflicts and sustain their regions' prosperity that if failed would have disrupted their societal positions. Secure in their social and political positions from an accumulation of wealth during the Villanovan period, Southern elites thus pursued solidarity among each other to perpetuate their hierarchies.

Scholars attempt to transfer the political structure of the South onto the North, but the North's diverging circumstances provoked a burgeoning of aggressive power dynamics. North Etruria maintained a steady economy in the Villanovan and Orientalizing periods based on agriculture, so Northern primate centers did not rapidly emerge like in the trade-rich South.¹² Without synoecism, more clans persisted into the Orientalizing period with numerous politically independent centers with less economic and social stratification. The intense competition for control among the many elites of a similar standing triggered instability in North Etruria's political and social hierarchies. Despite this, scholars like Simon Stoddart and James Whitley insist on analyzing North Etruria's power dynamics as a reflection of the South's, which

⁸ Stoddart and Whitley 1988, 769; Naso 2001, 111.

⁹ Riva 2009, 36.

¹⁰ Mara 2015, 203.

¹¹ Neil 2016, 19.

¹² Torelli 1986, 51; Banti 1973, 162.

contributes to a misunderstanding of North Etruria's political structure.¹³ The South's hierarchical security allowed them to perform friendship, but Northern elites had no clear establishment of a social order. Instead, warring rivalries seeking to annex other clans' land and resources to induce social stratification plagued the Orientalizing period of North Etruria.¹⁴ Because of this ongoing violence, the North Etruscan aristocracy required constructs of power more extreme than societal maintenance. Alessandro Naso posits that their need evolved into the concept of a warrior-prince as a leader who could not only protect but seize land to increase the clan's repute.¹⁵ The ferocity and domination that connoted the warrior-prince model ensured their communities' safety and prosperity under their leadership, their protection against challenges to their rule from within their communities, and the deterrence of attacks on their land by intimidating other elites. Even so, the warrior-prince model relied on the acknowledgment of that identity to have levity, which demanded distinguishing performances of identity to differentiate them from the other elites adopting the model. Despite attempts to compare the two, the South's politics cannot apply to the evolution of the North Etruscan warrior-prince that required intimidation to maintain their place in aristocracy.

IV. North Etruscan Cinerary Urns and the Intention of Proto-Portraiture

Proto-portraiture developed in North Etruria as an elevation of the Villanovan connection between the urn and body to present the elite self in an idealized actuality, which Chiusine canopic urns best incorporate. Scholars refer to these urns as "canopic" because the oval ossuary and head-shaped lid is similar to Egyptian canopic jars used to store the body's organs during

¹³ Stoddart and Whitley 1988, 769.

¹⁴ Menichetti 2001, 583.

¹⁵ Naso 2001, 123; Menichetti 2001, 583.

mummification, but Chiusine urns were not influenced by Egypt.¹⁶ While Chiusi was at the center of the multiple land routes, positioned on the Clanis River, and near the Tyrrhenian Sea, its northern position still subjected it to isolation from outside influence.¹⁷ Other Etruscan cities near the coast filtered outside influence to Chiusi, and these coastal cities did not import canopic jars, so Egypt could not have factored into canopic urns' conception.¹⁸ Additionally, no other contemporary culture had a precedent for the origination of Chiusine canopic urns.¹⁹ Because Chiusi did not adopt the shape, canopic urns must be a product of Etruscan innovation founded on their culture and traditions, which corresponds to the Villanovan concept of anthropomorphized urns. While Villanovan biconical urns are abstract in their rendering of the human form, canopic urns are a natural progression of the traditions of Villanovan urns to achieve a more definite self through proto-portraiture.

The *Female Canopic Urn* from 630-620 BCE from the Tomb of Sarteano in the Macchiapiana necropolis near Chiusi is one of few canopic urns with an established find context. The tomb also contained a realistic male canopic vase from the late seventh or early sixth century BCE (Fig. 4) and a late-seventh-century BCE impasto double-ax with a missing handle.²⁰ The female urn's head-lid has a naturalistic, full, and triangular face with almond-shaped eyes and a thin nose and lips, and the head's wide neck sits on a plain ovate ossuary.²¹ The lid's neck and top of the ossuary are perforated on either side of the urn.²² Ceramic mobile arms with closed fists are attached to the ribbon handles, and the silver hoop earrings display the deceased's

¹⁶ Taylor 2001t, 66.

¹⁷ Banti 1973, 162-163, 166; Moretti and Maetzke 1970, 113.

¹⁸ Moretti and Maetzke 1970, 113.

¹⁹ de Angelis 2016, 370.

²⁰ Minetti 2001, 583.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

femininity.²³ Additionally, the urn sits on a roughly worked limestone throne with no base. Finally, the head is bald in contrast to the male urn's short, curled hair. Artists often depict elite women in the Orientalizing period with covered hair as a status symbol, such as in a contemporary terracotta frieze from the aristocratic building complex at Poggio Civitate (Fig. 5). Because upper-class women covered their hair in public and the urn is a public representation of the deceased, the deceased's family most likely deposited the urn with a veil, and so the artist had no reason to render the urn's hair since it would go unseen. Through these naturalistic and individualized details, the *Female Canopic Urn* imparts the deceased woman's elite persona in her physical image.

Etruscologists tend to fixate on the possible realism of canopic urns, yet they ignore that proto-portraiture did not intend to render the true physical self of the deceased. While Alessandra Minetti calls the features of the *Female Canopic Urn* personal to the deceased woman, Luisa Banti argues that the similarity of these features on all realistic canopic urns dismisses any consideration of portraiture.²⁴ Unfortunately, both scholars miss the intention of proto-portraiture. Minetti is correct in that the female canopic urn's emphasized features are crucial to the deceased's portrayal, but as Banti demonstrates, these features do not vary from those of other canopic urns, including the male urn from the same tomb. However, while the faces of the Tomb of Sarteano urns share sharp and triangular features, this does not signal an absence of their deceased's independent identity. It instead conveys a widespread idealization of the elite's physical self seen on urns across North Etruria. For instance, the earliest known figural representation on a cinerary urn appears in Montescudaio, near Volterra, on the *Lid of a Cinerary*

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.; Banti 1973, 164.

Urn from an early-seventh-century BCE biconical terracotta urn. Despite its proto-portraiture taking the form of an abstract elite man sitting on the bowl cover, the artist also accentuates the figure's triangular face, a strong brow, almond-shaped eyes, and a thin nose. The presence of these features in various stylizations and regions evidences that they are idealized renditions that project their unique elite identity. North Etruscans did not intend proto-portraiture to be accurate depictions of themselves, and the gap in scholarship on the reasoning behind its development leads to a larger misunderstanding of the philosophical portrayal of the elite deceased's self on North Etruscan urns.

The implementation of proto-portraiture on cinerary urns can be understood in relation to the unstable political climate of North Etruria. As discussed above, North Etruscan elites generated the paragon of a mighty warrior-prince, but other elites could not fear the warrior-prince if they were unknown, and so the model depended on the performance of an impressionable identity within elite contexts to enable recognition. Physicality provided them with a correlation between their identity and their character as a warrior-prince. Warfare was contained within regional rivalries, so local elites likely saw each other often and knew each other's person.²⁵ Accordingly, physicality achieved the warrior-prince's objective to present one's aptness on the battlefield and evoke intimidation. Because of this, the face would have been the most influential aspect of the elite self as the most unique element of the human body.²⁶ The consistent emphasis on the deceased's face across elite North Etruscan urns confirms this. While North Etruscan cinerary urns are heterogeneous due to regional rivalries that required competing displays of dominance, both the *Female Canopic Urn* and the *Lid of the Cinerary Urn*

²⁵ O'Donoghue 2016, 85.

²⁶ Briguet, 123.

use striking features to promote the acknowledgment of one's identity that informs their power.²⁷ Therefore, the features on the *Female Canopic Urn* and the *Lid of the Cinerary Urn* are not only desirable for the actual self in elite networks, but they exemplify the discernibility of the deceased.

The communal identity expressed by North Etruscan cinerary urns in addition to one's individuality confirms the relevance of a perceptible identity to aristocratic power. For example, the perforations on the *Female Canopic Urn* are commonly found on canopic urns to attach the head-lid to the ossuary after the deposition of the deceased's remains.²⁸ The need to fasten the lid implies that mourners moved the urns enough to fear the safety of the remains inside. Eóin O'Donoghue believes that this is a sign that the urn participated in funerary rites before burial in the tomb, particularly in the procession to the tomb.²⁹ During the procession, mourners would grieve the urn-turned-body as a replacement for the elite self, and the public spectacle ritualized and monumentalized the deceased. The Romans of the middle and late Republic employed a similar sentiment with the donning of *imagines*—wax ancestral portrait-masks—of high-ranking ancestors by living members of the aristocratic clan in the deceased's procession.³⁰ Scholars like Gisela M. A. Richter and Charles Brian Rose have long disagreed on whether *imagines* stem from an Etruscan origin, but like canopic urns, they exhibited the deceased's identity and reputation in their community through a public spectacle.³¹ Furthermore, the lack of a notable linkage between North Etruscan elites and their clans in comparison to the *imagines* presents individuality as uniquely meaningful to the Etruscans. It proposes that elites' loyalties lie with

²⁷ Riva 2009, 73.

²⁸ O'Donoghue 2016, 85.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

³⁰ Rose 2008, 113.

³¹ Richter 1955, 39-40; Rose 2008, 112.

their communities as opposed to the betterment of their clan, which solidifies the lower class' content with their rulership. Although the *Lid of the Cinerary Urn* does not have indicators of use in funerary rites like the procession, it likewise champions a connection of the elite with the community over one based on their clanship because it persists as a sign of active participation in the community from Villanovan tradition. As the man on the lid sits on top of the symbol of community, he maintains his communal identity but monumentalizes his status by placing himself above the community. The neglect of clan identity in favor of promoting one's personal and communal identity on cinerary urns establishes their importance within the community and justifies their rule according to the warrior-prince model.

In tandem with these funerary rites, the urns' usage of insignia of rank implies that personhood is its own symbol of rank and attaches a value to elite selfhood. As previously mentioned, the *Female Canopic Urn* bears a striking resemblance to the woman on the Poggio Civitate frieze. In addition to both being veiled as a sign of an upper-class woman, they sit enthroned on chairs with semi-circular backs. The appearance of thrones across media suggests the common reservation of thrones for those at the height of their hierarchy or clan in aristocratic culture.³² The woman in the frieze supports this as the only person enthroned, and since the male urn from the Tomb of Sarteano was not enthroned, the woman represented by the *Female Canopic Urn* must have been highly respected in her clan and the wider community. Moreover, on the *Lid of a Cinerary Urn*, the funerary banquet attended by the man is another sign of rank and enhanced by social perspective, as he would be approximately double the height of his attendant if standing.³³ Because the elements of these urns highlight the deceased elites' prestige

³² Wehgartner 2013, 437.

³³ Bonfante 1986, 233; Briguet 1986, 127.

in death, the presence of the elite self must communicate status by association, and this is not a coincidental relationship. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes the phenomenon of communities misrecognizing reality due to the upper class creating political and social dynamics for their personal gain.³⁴ In the case of North Etruria, the aristocracy conflated personhood and power by elevating their identity with funeral rites and insignia of rank to validate the warrior-prince model to their communities. Good leaders do not necessarily need a perceptible identity, but North Etruscan elites ensured their communities' belief in that ideology to support their influence. As a result of connections built between the elite self and insignia of rank, elites framed their personhood as another insignia of rank expressed by proto-portraiture on their urns.

Finally, because of the formation of an inexplicable link between authority and reputation in North Etruria, their cinerary urns' proto-portraiture reveals a philosophy of self-worth in connection to their personhood. The destruction of the physical self by cremation allowed elites to create a new identity with the creation of their anthropomorphized urns, yet they did not refashion their character.³⁵ Rather, they reconstructed and immortalized their elite self with proto-portraiture.³⁶ To consider their person such a fundamental aspect of themselves, elite personhood must have transcended power dynamics to have eminence in the Etruscan afterlife. Returning to Bourdieu's theory about communal misrecognition of reality, as having power was good and that power belonged to a warrior-prince with a strong identity, a philosophical association developed between individualism and virtue. Individualism and/or a particular physicality cannot define one's morals in actuality, yet because both were advantageous in an elite's life, North Etruscan society believed that individualism was more than a sign of status.

³⁴ Riva 2009, 73.

³⁵ Shipley 2016, 64.

³⁶ de Grummond 2015, 236.

Jean-René Jannot conceptualized the afterlife as personal to the deceased, so not only did individuality mark an elite's inherent goodness, but it also had currency in the afterlife with proto-portraiture's proof of their uniqueness on their urn.³⁷ Individualism embodied by striking features seen in proto-portraiture is then philosophically good and desirable for an elite since it guarantees them a good afterlife, and so North Etruscans attached significant value to the elite self. In this way, proto-portraiture culminates as a depiction of a philosophy of self-worth in which power informs reputation, and reputation informs power. Proto-portraiture in North Etruscan cinerary urns thus perpetuates these coveted, pronounced characteristics of the elite self in death because they were the basis of their status and righteousness in life.

V. Conclusion

The Villanovan association of the urn with the body, and specifically the elite self during the later period, provided a basis for the formation of proto-portraiture in North Etruria. Orientalizing North Etruria experienced a lack of social stratification that caused anxiety among the many elites of a similar rank vying for power, and in place of the gift-exchange model incorporated by the centralized South, North Etruscan elites glorified the warrior-prince who relied on a strong identity to assert their leadership. According to that model, elites built upon their physicality and presence, which translated into the use of proto-portraiture in their cinerary urns. While the contemporaneous *Female Canopic Urn* and the *Lid of a Cinerary Urn* implement proto-portraiture in different styles, their use of prominent facial features to express the deceased's high standings demonstrates a widespread conceptualization of the perfect elite warrior-prince. In addition, the pairing of proto-portraiture with insignia of rank ritualized elite

³⁷ Jannot 2000, 88.

personhood into another insignia of rank. This elevation, in combination with the importance of a perceptible identity, transformed elite individuality into a sign of morality and gave their personhood value. As related to their philosophy of self-worth, North Etruscan elites developed proto-portraiture for their cinerary urns as an articulation of their influence in life and their goodness in death.

Appendix

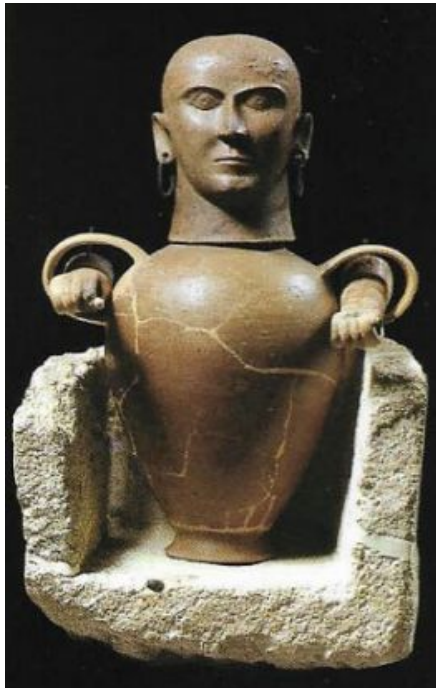


Fig. 1: Image of a Female Canopic Urn from the Tomb of Sarteano in the Macchiapiana

Necropolis, Sarteano, 630-620 BCE (Source: *The Etruscans*, edited by Mario Torelli, pl. 132.2).



Fig. 2: Image of a Lid of a Cinerary Urn, Montescudaio, early seventh century BCE (Source: *The Art of the Etruscans* by Mario Moretti and Guglielmo Maetzke, pl. 147).



Fig. 3: Image of Male Grave Good from Tomb 1 of the Impiccato Necropolis, Tarquinia, late ninth to early eighth century BCE (Source: *Etruscan Civilization* by Sybille Haynes, fig. 11).

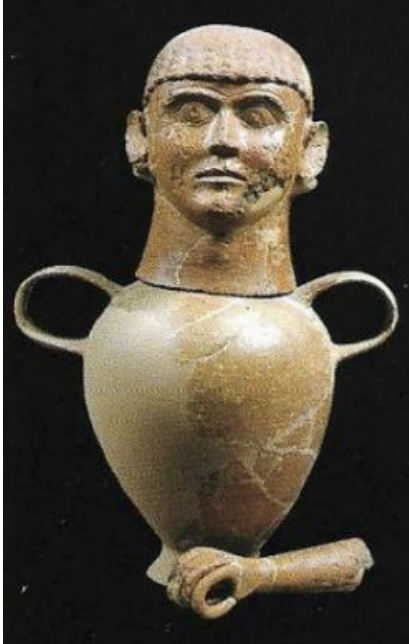


Fig. 4: Image of a Male Canopic Urn from the Tomb of Sarteano in the Macchiapiana Necropolis, Sarteano, late seventh or early sixth century BCE (Source: *The Etruscans*, edited by Mario Torelli, pl. 132.1).

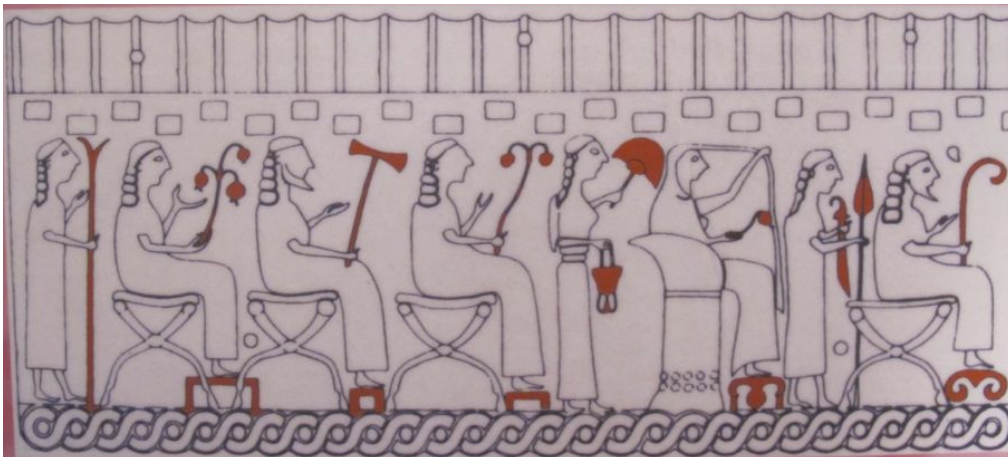


Fig. 5: Image of a Terracotta Frieze Plaque from the Archaic Building Complex of Poggio Civitate, Poggio Civitate, 590-585 BCE (Source: *Etruscan Civilization* by Sybille Haynes, fig. 101).

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