An Etruscan Cinerary Urn in the Kelsey Museum

Cinerary urn
Provenance unknown but probably Chiusi, Italy, mid-second century BCE
Terracotta, urn dimensions: L. 44 cm, H. 27 cm, Diam. 20 cm; lid dimensions: L. 44.5 cm, H. 12 cm, Diam. 23 cm
Kelsey Museum 1461

This terracotta cinerary urn was purchased in 1909 by Walter Dennison while on a fellowship at the American School of Classical Studies in Rome. The façade of the urn is framed by Corinthian pilasters and a decorative egg-and-dart border. Four figures are molded in high relief, and their limbs and clothing overlap the frame to create the impression of dynamic action; the two central figures lunge forward to strike each other. Their armor is differentiated as if they represent opposing sides. The kneeling figure wears a muscled cuirass, while the standing figure wears a cuirass made of what appear to be leather strips. Traces of red, yellow, and gray-blue paint remain on their tunics, helmets, and shields and give an indication of how vibrantly colored the piece would have been at the time of its creation. The sculpting of the relief figures and of the deceased figure depicted on the lid is characteristic of the hellenizing of Etruscan art of the third and second centuries BCE (Sannibale 1994, 91). A fragmentary painted inscription along the top of the façade reads Vel./.../Vel/h.../. Vel and Velthur were common Etruscan male names. This was most likely, then, the name of the deceased.

Although the archaeological provenance of this piece is unknown, cinerary urns were widely used in chamber tombs throughout Etruria, and this urn can be compared with nearly identical examples from the area of Chiusi, in southern Umbria.¹ Abalster and travertine versions of this same scene are known, but the rendering of the scene in terracotta is much more common, particularly into the second century. This is perhaps due to the relatively greater expense of sculpting the stone (Sannibale 1994, 92). The ubiquity of these urns in terracotta suggests that they were mold-made in large quantities.

The urn probably illustrates the tragic finale of the events of the Seven against Thebes, the myth canonized by

¹ Cristofani 1978, 210 and fig. 201; Sannibale 1994, nos. 19, 21.1, 22.1, 22.2, 22.3, 23–26; Briguet 1987, fig. IV.34.
Aeschylus in his fifth-century BCE play but present in the Greek poetic tradition as early as the eighth century (Hecht and Bacon 1973, 6). After the exile of King Oedipus, his two sons decided to alternate their rule over the city of Thebes on a yearly basis. Eteokles, the younger brother, reigned first, but after one year he refused to resign the throne to his brother, Polynikes. Polynikes then gathered a band of six warriors and their armies to attack Thebes and reclaim the city. Following a long stalemate, it was agreed that seven warriors from each side would battle at each of Thebes’s seven gates in order to determine the outcome of the war. Polynikes and his six champions challenged Eteokles and six chosen defenders. Opposing pairs engaged in single combat at each gate, and the brothers were paired against each other. Eteokles’s Theban warriors were victorious in every contest except one: the urn depicts the dramatic final battle when Polynikes and Eteokles simultaneously slew each other. The tragedy was the result of the curse of Oedipus’s family, which his offspring was fated to bear.

Flanking the two central warriors are two female figures whose identity can be understood in several ways. They have been labeled as Erinyes, or Furies, Greek chthonic goddesses associated with retribution, often with the exacting of family curses. The “hateful” and “fleet-footed Fury” features in Aeschylus’s dramatization of the story. Alternatively, we might understand these figures to represent aspects of the Etruscan winged spirit, Vanth. They bear her typical attributes: boots, chiton, and straps across their bare chests. Vanths, too, were chthonic deities, often depicted at the scene of battles bearing a torch and appearing to encourage the fighters. They placed themselves somewhere between the role of bystander and of participant in the narrative (De Grummond 2006, 223). In Etruria, Vanth was associated with the descent into the afterlife; she was present at death, though not responsible for it. The Etruscan portrayal of Vanth seems to have derived from the similar depiction of “fury” figures on South Italian vases (Feo 2003, 83; Bonfante 1987, 267). Therefore, although the female figures in this relief may be connected to the Greek representation of the Fury, important to the Theban story, they are best understood in this Etruscan setting as images of Vanth, framing a Greek myth with Etruscan characters.

Explanations vary for how an Etruscan audience would have understood this Greek myth. While some scholars credit Etruria with being culturally “just another Greek colony,” others dismiss Etruscans as having had a primitive understanding of Greek mythology, attracted by such stories because of the Italian “taste for bloody spectacle” (D’Agostino and Cerchiai 1999, xix; Brunn 1870–1896, 27). In the Etruscan corpus,
Eteokles and Polynikes appear together in various fighting stances in temple sculpture, countless cinerary urns, and in tomb painting. For example, in the wall paintings of the fourth century BCE François Tomb in Vulci, the brothers (labeled as Euthucle and Pulunice) are depicted in this same final “monomachy” pose (Brilliant 1984, 33–34, 47). Regardless of how scholars understand an Etruscan audience’s appreciation of Greek myth, the appearance of scenes of Eteokles and Polynikes in an entirely Etruscan medium, the terracotta urn, reveals the active appropriation of aspects of Greek culture by Etruscan artisans.

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**Works Cited**


