The Etruscans were a major civilization in Western Europe from the 8th century BCE to the 1st century BCE. They were known for their art, architecture, and religious practices. Their influence is evident in various aspects of European culture. In this paper, we will explore the Etruscan culture, focusing on their tombs and the figures depicted in them. The Etruscan tombs are one of the most important sources of information about Etruscan life and beliefs.

The Context of the Tomb

Etruscan burial rituals had been centred around various styles of rock tombs for centuries. The earliest tombs from the 7th century BCE to the 4th century BCE were simple, leaving little room for ornamentation above the bodies and the chamber below ground. Rock tomb architecture restructured in the 6th century BCE, where tombs were typically cut into steep cliffs or hills. These tombs are quite unusual in Italy, but they have been found in other Mediterranean cultures, indicating the Etruscan influence frequently in their designs. However, there is also some evidence for the use of wooden sarcophagi in Etruscan tombs. From the 6th to the 4th centuries BCE, rectangular catacombs have been found in the form of tombs where the legs of a wooden sarcophagus may have rested. These sarcophagi appear to mimic chests used in everyday life. The holes cut into the grave for the legs allowed for a stronger structural base for the wooden coffin, as the environment of the tomb decomposed the wood quickly. It is also possible that these sarcophagi evolved to be designed without any legs, and may have been placed in rock-cut graves such as this one, but any evidence for this will have decomposed. Many Etruscan designs for tombs mirror practices in daily life, perhaps to ensure the same standard of living for the dead in the afterlife.

Greek influence on Etruscan burial rites is undeniably due to the amount of Greek pottery recovered from Etruscan tombs. This has often led to the opinion that the Etruscans borrowed their mythology and beliefs from the Greek, changing the names of deities to fit into their language. However, there is also evidence of a strong and unique Etruscan culture thriving. The figures of Charun in the tomb painting can be directly compared to the Greek mythological figure Charon, both in the similarity of name and role as a guide in the Underworld. But there are distinct differences between these two figures that indicate Greek influence did not submerge Etruscan tradition. The Greek kyklopis dating from 500 to 450 BC Athens in the Ashmolean depicts Charon the ferryman. He is very human-like and benevolent, reaching out to the flapping soul before him. He is also distinctly shown as a ferryman on his boat. The Etruscan Charon is never associated with water and is far more agricultural and470f;g, offering a more terrifying image of the Underworld. Charon is often divided in its multiple beings, as seen in the Tomba dei Due Tetti at Tarquinia, where the names Charun, Charu, Charun, and Charun believably possibly Charon Lucu can be read on the walls.

The Etruscan Pantheon

Etruscan religion is one of the strongest areas of Etruscan study. The survival of tomb reliefs, mortuary writing in the 5th century BCE, and the discovery of the Bronze Lovers of Placentia. There are various innovations of Vanth and Charu, suggesting a distinct veneration surrounding Etruscan deities in terms of their numbers, attributes, and appearance. This lack of standardization is at contrast to contemporary cultures of the time, particularly the defining features of Greek mythology. The Etruscans were well-known for the art of haruspicy, noting animals, bird flight paths, lightning, etc. The Bronze Lovers of Placentia, dating to the late 2nd century BCE was used as a teaching tool for students so they could learn what marks on certain areas of the lover meant. The engravings on the lover divide the heavens into 16 parts, notably more than the later Roman belief of a four-part heaven. The gods dwelled in a particular region of the sky, revealing why Etruscan temples face different directions, unlike Greek ones. In order for surviving constructions of the Etruscan in Marian Croppa and on the lover to match up, it has been argued that the gods in each region changed with the seasons. Using the positions of the sunrise and sunset on the solstices and equinoxes, the Etruscan heaven moved two regions per season, moving both clockwise and counterclockwise at two different points. This would coincide with one per month and change the position of the heavens with the seasons.

The Etruscan figures are painted with bold, thick lines in dark colours and the typical almond-shaped eyes of Etruscan art are just visible. The procession is flanked by two Etruscan demons, Charu on the left and Vanth on the right. Charu is an ugly, blue-coloured demon, an image stemming from the late archaic period where scenes of the Underworld became more frightening and intimidating. He is dressed in a short chiton and holds a hammer, his most recognisable symbol. Lounging in front of the door to the Underworld, he is fulfilling his role as the guardian of the entrance. Vanth on the far right appears to be escorting the newly deceased to the Underworld. She too is dressed in a short chiton and holds a torch; there is a purposeful contrast between her human-like appearance and pretty face against Charu’s demonic exterior. The places a hand on the deceased’s shoulder. This is an ambiguous gesture that could be construed as comforting or threatening. Their very nature as otherworldly beings suggests they are threats to humans. Vanth could be forcing the woman and child towards the Netherworld, ensuring they do not escape. Charu’s hammer is distinctly a weapon and adds a tone to violence of the scene. However, their postures are far more relaxed than this interpretation allows. Vanth is a guide, her torch as a beacon of light that she can follow in the darkness, whilst Charu is learning against a rock with his hammer on the ground in a very unthreatening manner. The rock and the door that Charu and Vanth stand in are the symbols that indicate this is a journey to the Underworld. Rocks are also used as an indicator of the afterlife in Homer’s Odyssey and the door acts as a locus medius, an entrance to another world. The characteristic single rows of three bessus displayed on the door are most likely real life and any recurring feature in Etruscan tomb paintings. This scene reveals unique Etruscan beliefs about the journey after death, where souls were escorted by demons, yet were received by the familiarity of their families.

Conclusion

Etruscan beliefs come through in this painting, both from the incantations of the two demons and the continuation of the usual journey in the afterlife. A comprehensive and unique religion acts as the backdrop to this scene; the 16-part heaven and complex changes of the seasons strengthen the flexibility of the deities and the fluid roles as guardians and guides for specific incantations. The depiction of the family and the graves themselves reveal a snapshot of daily life, constructed from the use of statues as sarcophagi, and the stylistic nature of the artwork reattaching the Etruscan culture present in the scene. Similarities can only be drawn between the Greeks and the Etruscans but the prevalence of Greek influence on the Etruscans’ beliefs is more an indication of the importance and existence of the separate society that is clearly present in this tomb. The painting remains as a very moving and affirming scene of life after death, where, amongst uncertainty and divine characters, the comforting familiarity of reuniting with loved ones creates a sense of hope surrounding the unknown afterlife.

By Anna Henderson
Supervisor: Clare Rowan
Department of Classics, University of Warwick
Undergraduate Research Support Scheme