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Review of Ilaria Domenici, Etruscae Fabulae: Mito e Rappresentazione

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***Etruscae Fabulae.* Mito e Rappresentazione.** By Ilaria Domenici. Roma: Giorgio Bretschneider, 2009. Paperback. 315 pages, 21 figures and 6 plates. ISBN: 978-88-7689-253-0. $250.00.

Reviewed by ALEXANDRA A. CARPINO, Northern Arizona University

The study of Etruscan art is not only compounded by the absence of surviving literature and historiography and the strong, anti-Etruscan bias in the few Greek and Romans texts whose writers comment on this culture, but also by the fact that much of the surviving material comes from tombs and sanctuaries, a great deal of which was neither systematically excavated nor carefully documented. As a result, iconographical and iconological studies are especially challenging, and sometimes it is impossible to determine the ancient meaning or significance of individual works. Both regional diversity and the Etruscans' appropriation of foreign or outside (e.g., Greek, Roman, Italic, Near Eastern, etc.) ideas, myths, stories, and styles further complicate such studies. Does the latter, for example, indicate a lack of local creativity or do the Etruscan scenes which include and/or allude to foreign literary and/or visual sources represent indigenous stories with multiple messages and themes, ones that functioned effectively and efficiently in their various native contexts (domestic, civic, funerary, political or religious)?

Since the Renaissance, numerous scholars have grappled with the issue of the Etruscans' mythical heritage, looking for examples of *etruscae fabulae*, that is, myths that can be characterized as *puramente etruschi* (as opposed to *etrusco-latini*, *etrusco-romani,* etc.) among the vast repertoire of stories found on locally-manufactured vases, mirrors, gems, sarcophagi and urns. The latest study to tackle this subject appears in Ilaria Domenici's monograph. The author is very specific in her definition of what constitutes an Etruscan myth, defining them as those which were handed down by Greek and/or Roman written sources but which do not appear in their visual repertoire: that is, myths known through both written sources and an iconographical tradition (p. 64). For this reason, she does not consider well-known representations such as Hercle nursing at the breast of Uni, or the hero's interaction with Mlacuch, a story that appears on a well-known relief mirror from the early fifth century BCE now in the British Museum. Instead, she focuses on the following five myths/themes, all of which appear on either engraved bronze mirrors and/or cinerary urns produced between the fourth and second centuries BCE: Tages and Vegoia (Etruscan prophets) (Chapter I), the Vibenna Brothers (national heroes) (Chapter II), the Wolf/Wolf-Man in the Well (chthonic monsters and divination) (Chapter III), Epiur and Mariś (divine children) (Chapter IV), and the Hero with the Plow (internal social conflicts) (Chapter V). The monograph also includes an introduction that presents a broad and in-depth

history of the study of the Etruscans' mythology, featuring discussion and analysis of the work of Annio da Viterbo, E. Gerhard, H. Brunn and G. Körte, G.Q. Giglioli, M. Pallottino, G. Camporeale, F. H. Massa Pairault, M. Torelli, J. P. Small, and N. T. de Grummond (Chapter I, 1–58). It ends with a short conclusion (Chapter VI, 261–272), which is followed by a comprehensive bibliography and an index listing the characters and divinities discussed in the text. The few illustrations included appear at the end, in two sections: there are 21 figures, all drawings of varying quality (there is a heavy reliance, for example, on images from Brunn and Körte, and Gerhard), followed by 6 plates with 13 black and white photographs.

Domenici's main objective is to test all the hypotheses proposed in the past for the five myths/themes listed above before reconsidering them from the perspective of new iconographic and semiotic analyses so that the reasons for their use and their meanings in Etruria can be better understood. In Chapter IV, for example, she provides sound reasoning for rejecting the correlation of the scenes on a group of cinerary urns from Volterra, S. Sisto, Chiusi, and Corciano that depict a wolf or a man dressed in wolf skins in a well with the monster Olta mentioned in a passage by Pliny (p. 178).[1] She also points out the flaws in some of the other interpretations of the scenes, both those that look to Greek mythology for an explanation (e.g., the myths of Thanatos and Sisyphos, Odysseus and Elpenor, and the Argonauts), and others that argue for a native interpretation (e.g., relating it to the scene on the lid of a Villanovan bronze cinerary urn from Bisenzio). In order to get a better sense of what the story might be about, Domenici instead compares the actions depicted to similar representations on engraved bronze mirrors, specifically scenes showing individuals in a well. Despite the difference in subject matter, the similarity of the visual details in these narratives leads her to suggest that the urns' imagery conveyed a similar theme: namely, the capture of a seer, a common local subject (e.g., the story of Cacu) (pp. 182–183). Moreover, because the urns show the capture of a wolf or, in some cases, a man dressed in a wolf-skin, both of whom emerge from a well, the author prefers to read these particular representations as mantic images portraying the capture of a monster-like seer, especially since, in Etruria, prophecy was only possible when a connection with the underworld was established. Thus, to her, they correspond to the wide body of narrative material in Etruria that deals with fate and destiny (p. 188), subjects she believes are at the heart of the Etruscans' indigenous myths. By focusing on elements such as context, action, gestures, semantic units, basic narrative sequences and variety, Domenici concludes that the Etruscans not only had indigenous myths but that these were part of a "processo di organizzazione di un'identità, . . ." which "attraverso le

[1] Given her rejection of the Olta hypothesis, it was puzzling to see the author use the label "Olta" to title the urns under discussion. Anyone who does not take the time to read the entire chapter may come away believing that she actually supports this identification.

immagini, veicola precisi messaggi politici" (p. 272). Moreover, as noted above, she proposes that "la maggior parte delle iconografie prese in esame sia strettamente connessa con la speculazione sui *fata*. . . lascia intravedere quella che si dimostra la cifra caratterizzante della mitologia etrusca: il suo stretto collegamento con le procedure augurali e con le pratiche divinatorie, in una parola, con l'*Etrusca disciplina*" (ibid.). Finally, as others have also argued before her, she supports the notion that the representations of these myths should be considered as a separate "language," not just as bearers of meaning tied to literary texts. All in all, Domenici's conclusions are sound, and her monograph represents an important and in-depth treatment of a complicated and sometimes controversial subject. Moreover, her approach, especially with respect to the analysis of visual details, is illuminating, revealing new ways of seeing and understanding well-scrutinized stories and representations.

As has already been pointed out by Jolivet, the main weakness of this study is the "l'absence de toute tentative d'approfondir les mécanismes de transmission de ces mythes, qui sont loin d'être indifférents pour apprécier les mutations dont ils ont pu faire l'objet — même si les questions que l'on peut se poser à cet égard sont, pour la plupart, destinées à demeurer sans réponse: comment voyageaient les récits, entre voie orale et supports écrits? Comment circulaient les images, celles destinées aux vivants et celles réservées aux morts? Ensemble, ou séparément? Quel a pu être, dans ces deux domaines, le rôle des mimes ou des acteurs qui se produisaient devant le public des tréteaux du *fanum Voltumnae* ou devant les cercles aristocratiques étrusques? Et peut-on concevoir dans la circulation des mythes locaux, à l'instar de la distinction classique proposée par R. Bianchi Bandinelli pour l'art étrusco-italique, une distinction entre un filon populaire et un filon érudit?"[2] However, despite these omissions, Domenici's work will be valuable to scholars and students interested in learning more about the Etruscans' mythical heritage and/or joining in the debate about its originality, meaning, and significance.

[2] Jolivet 2011.

Reference

Jolivet, Vincent. 2011. Review of Ilaria Domenici, *Fabulae Etruscae: Mito e Rappresentazione, 2009. Histara – les comptes rendus* <http://histora.sorbonne.fr/cr.php?cr=1156>.

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