A Workshop of Stone Sculpture Production in South Etruria: la Bottega del Gruppo di San Donato

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Some 40 years have passed since the fundamental work by Alain Hus *Récherches sur la statuaire en pierre étrusque archaïque*, in which attention was given to the investigation of stone sculpture production of the various Etruscan towns. The pieces were in fact enumerated according to town, “Vulci 1,” “Vulci 2,” “Orvieto 1,” etc. Thanks to the work of this French scholar, who, for the first time, arranged the most important pieces of Etruscan sculpture in a general framework, we can recognize the work of the different sculpture-production centres, for example of Chiusi and Vulci, based both on observations about the material used, and on stylistic considerations.

This work still remains the basis for all further research, although the discovery and careful publication of the statues from Ceri has added another whole chapter to our knowledge about this subject. We now know that the very beginnings of monumental stone sculpture are not to be sought in northern Etruria but rather in the southern part (indeed precisely in the area of Cerveteri), and that it was probably not imported works of art which were the earliest sources of inspiration, but rather immigrant craftsmen from the Near East.

We can now add many more pieces to the list of sculptures discussed by Hus. An assessment based on my PhD research on *Stone Sculpture in the Round and in High Relief from South Etruria in the Orientalizing and Archaic Age* shows that the quantity of known pieces of sculpture from southern Etruria alone has more than quadrupled, even if many of them are minor fragments. Many pieces come from the Belgian excavations in Castro and have not been published before. They can be positively identified as products of the local sculpture tradition both because of their certain provenance and because of the type of the stone, the characteristic local pink nenfro. This will be the subject of another study.

However, almost all other new acquisitions have appeared at the various international auction sales. In most cases it is impossible to say where statues have been produced, except on the basis of stylistic considerations. There seems to be a risk that all good Etruscan sculpture is assumed to be of grey nenfro and hence automatically attri-
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Figure 1 – Feline hindquarters. Right to left: nos. 37, 38, 39, 40 and 41 (Soprintendenza Archeologica per la Toscana).

Figure 2 – Feline hindquarters. No. 37 (Soprintendenza Archeologica per la Toscana).

Figure 3 – Feline hindquarters. No. 38 (Soprintendenza Archeologica per la Toscana).

uted to Vulci. This may be true in most cases, but it is important to remember that we cannot always be certain.

In recent years attention has been focused on the reconstruction of a series of workshops producing Etruscan stone sculpture. Marina Martelli, in an article in the catalogue of the exhibition dedicated to the Micali Painter of 1988, and in the Festschrift for Hans Peter Isler in 2001, has made an essential contribution to the reconstruction of the period of greatest productivity, which is attributed to the city of Vulci and takes place immediately after the middle of the 6th century BC. First she identified different groups within the Etruscan sculptural corpus, the best examples of which were then attributed
to a number of Maestri, as the highest qualified exponents of those groups. Some of the groups of statues are supposed to have been produced within the same workshop or bottega, while all of them were part of the scuola vulcente, the production centre in the territory of Vulci, perhaps within the boundaries of the city itself.

The groups so far proposed are called Gruppo Amsterdam, Gruppo Amburgo, and Gruppo Villa Giulia, labels which refer to the towns and the museums which hold the most important specimens of each production. The Amsterdam Group is thought to have been active in the years immediately after the middle of the 6th century (550-540 BC), and has been named after a sphinx preserved in the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam. The Hamburg Group
is believed to have been contemporary, and to have been produced by the same workshop. Two sphinxes of this group are preserved in the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe. Lastly, the Villa Giulia Group is named after the Hippocamp Rider preserved in the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome. This piece, together with a small group of similar statues, has been dated somewhat later than the two preceding groups, to around the beginning of the last third of the 6th century BC. As in the case of the Bottega del Gruppo della Cuccumella, the findcontext determines the definition of the group.

In my work I propose two new workshops connected with the beginning of the *floruit* of sculpture at Vulci, the Gruppo Brown and the Bottega del Gruppo della Cuccumella, which are both dated to the beginning of the 6th century BC. A third Group, the Bottega del Gruppo di San Donato, here to be discussed, is closely connected to the Hamburg- and Amsterdam Groups and may be dated to the beginning of the second half of the century.

In 2000 a group of sculptures became known from illegal excavations in the northern part of the territory of Vulci, now in custody at the Soprintendenza Archeologica per la Toscana. All these pieces had been carved from the typical Vulcian nenfro, which is of a grey colour with a greenish hue, and are uniform in style and dimensions. Together with the sculptures were also some moulded architectural elements of grey tufa-stone (inferior in quality to the nenfro) and of limestone, and also a series of Hellenistic ceramics, comprising black glazed ware and ceram-
ica comune. Some 30 pieces could be reconstructed from several fragments. We find reclining felines, winged sphinxes, and probable winged hippocamps. A whole series of feline bodies belong to lions or panthers as well as sphinxes and are shown in a crouching position.

FELINES

Typical for the feline hind-parts is the tear-shaped decorative motif on the articulation point (Figs. 2-5). There are five of them (Fig. 1 and Figs 2-6), of which nos. 40 and 41 show a tail which passes under the body to coil up the back of the animal, on the left side of the less preserved piece (no. 40), and on the right side on the other one. They are slightly bigger than the other three pieces, nos. 37-9, which are without a tail. Presumably there was at least a fourth, similar, smaller animal. We can imagine, following the reconstruction of the Cucumella Tumulus made by Anna Maria Sgubini Moretti, that animals of different sizes were to be seen at various levels on the same tumulus context. Moreover, no. 39 and no. 41, belonging to the two different series of size, are both of a slightly heavier and more compact kind of stone. The two qualities of nenfro probably come from different layers of the same quarry.

We also have a series of paws, nos. 113-116. Two pieces preserve part of the basis, nos. 113 and 114, and are certainly front legs (Fig. 7). We can see that the more visible front paws are better defined and have four digits, while the rear paws have only three, which are proportionally bigger. Hence, the stray paw, no. 115, with four claws is a front paw. Another piece,

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figure 10 – Front part of a sphinx. Note the triple fillet at the beginning of the wings. No. 167 (Soprintendenza Archeologica per la Toscana).
no. 116, is a leg, while no. 117 preserves a large part of the body (Fig. 8). Both pieces indicate a squatting, almost sitting animal or sphinx.

One feline head is preserved (Fig. 9). It has no mane, it has ears laid back in the Assyrian manner, and it is roaring. It could belong to a panther with a profile head, although all the panthers known so far are not roaring. Despite the damage, one can easily see the high quality of the work.

SPHINXES

At least three specimens of the same kind of winged sphinx have been preserved (Figs. 10-2). No. 169 has been put together from almost ten different pieces, thanks to a patient restoration. Although it is the least well preserved piece, with a rather battered surface, it shows the overall position of the sphinx, combining the individual elements found on the other pieces, such as the hair with smooth braids, and the wing details (Fig. 12). The wings exhibit features typical of the production of Vulci: a swollen central element, flanked by two fillets, which form the base for the scaled feathers below. The wing tips are carefully moulded with rounded ends to the feathers. The section of the wing, seen from above, is depressed. The feathers are more densely distributed than those of the Group of Hamburg sphinxes, but the most characteristic distinguishing feature is a small triple fillet at the start of the wing.
HIPOCAMPS

Fragments of at least two different hippocamps are preserved (Figs. 16-18), counting two pieces of mane, nos. 248 and 249, which belong to approximately the same part of this Fabelwesen. They display the characteristic narrow section as all hippocamps we know (Fig. 16). Also characteristic is the huge fish-tail which is bisected by a central relief line, and is also found in a simplified form on the hippocamp-rider from the Villa Giulia, although this is probably dated a little later (Fig. 17). Another small fragment (Fig. 18, left) shows one of the small fins or wings (which are thought to be at the base of the forelegs, along the body), decorated with parallel oblique relief lines, perpendicular to the body. Two pieces (nos. 243-4; fig. 18, right) show a roughly eye-shaped decorative motif, which can be found on the articulation or “elbow” of the forelegs. Four other pieces which probably depict hoofs (nos. 259-62) complete the picture.

These pieces may be compared with three far more complete statues sold in a relatively short period of time on the international art market. Two of them were sold at Sotheby’s New York in 1987 (and in 1988), sphinx no. 170 (Fig. 13) and hippocamp no. 241 (Fig. 14)\(^1\), while a third hippocamp, no. 239, was inventoried in Hamburg in 1990 (Fig. 15)\(^1\). If we look at the sphinxes, all the details match: the plain braids or heavy locks just above shoulder-length, the carefully cut wings, the rounded chest, and, above all, the triple fillet at the starting point of the wing, which is best to be seen on nos. 167 and 168 (Figs. 10-11).\(^1\) This detail is not found on any of the many similar sphinxes examined, and seems to be a distinctive mark of this group.

The Hippocamps, of which apparently minor fragments were abandoned where they were found, are best understood by comparison to the more complete statues.
figure 15 – Hippocamp no. 239 (Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, inv. No. 1990.18. Museum Photograph)

figure 16 – Mane of a hippocamp. No. 248 (Soprintendenza Archeologica per la Toscana).
Looking at the Hamburg-New York pieces we understand the strange “eyes” on the smaller fragments (the decoration of the articulation point), and also the small part of the fin or wing and hoofs. The manes show an identical hairline and are built of fine locks, more subtle than the ones on some other equine heads known from Vulci. They fall onto the shoulder with an oblique line, again in a manner that seems to be distinctive to this group.

In one case these fragments left in situ can help to complete the auction pieces. Sphinx no. 169 (Fig. 12) preserves the position of the front paws as quite straight and seeming to protrude forwards. This posture compares with that of sphinx no. 170 (Fig. 13), where we can posit the body according to the head, which is to be supposed as vertically erect. Hence the front paws were not vertical in respect to the body but protruding, as if it were a bird’s body (such as that of a siren) rather than a feline one (i.e., that of a sphinx). The auction catalogue actually described it as “Figure of a Siren,” perhaps because further information was available, which has now been lost.

My hypothesis is that all these pieces are to be attributed to a coherent group, the work of a single workshop, probably for a single grave monument. We can certainly attribute them to a workshop in Vulci, which may have exported the completed statues, or may just have brought the stone to be worked on the spot, in this northern part of the territory. The group should be dated close to the Hamburg and Amsterdam Groups, a little after the mid 6th century BC, around 540 BC. If this hypothesis is correct, it shows us

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figure 17 – Fish-tail of a hippocamp. No. 240 (Soprintendenza Archeologica per la Toscana).

figure 18 – Detail of the small fins or wings of a hippocamp. No. 242 (left). Detail of the eye-shaped decorative motive of the forelegs of a hippocamp. No. 243 (right) (Soprintendenza Archeologica per la Toscana. Photo Pierre Drap).
how, within the *scuola vulcente*, some sculptors produced some very closely connected sculptural groups, perhaps working within the same workshop. For a single grave context they would produce a distinct group, as it seems in this case, which would follow the general regional pattern for sculptural production, but would also have some unique and distinctive characteristics. This would be appropriate for an artistic tradition which at this time was not the result of mass-production, but rather of individual special commissions, for burials which were intended to be seen as status symbols.

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**NOTES**

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3. Defended at the University of Rome “La Sapienza” in July 2002. The publication of the work is currently in preparation for *Studi Etruschi*.
4. In fact, in my research I have preferred to organize the catalogue according to iconographical motives, starting with felines, the most frequently depicted, and ending with rams and bovines.
5. Martelli 1988 and Martelli 2001. When this contribution was delivered, two other articles by the same author were in press (Martelli *In Press 1* and Martelli *In Press 2*). In the meanwhile (April 2007), these articles have come out (see *Bibliography*). It was possible to make minor adjustments to the text presented in London, in order to acknowledge the edition of many “new” pieces by Marina Martelli.
7. Inv. no. APM 9322. Cf. Brijder 1978, 1; fig. 7; Brijder 1984; fig. 1a-b; Martelli 1988, 28, note 13; Lulof Kars 1994, 53-4; fig. 10; Lulof 2000, 85-7; pl. 47, cat. 101; Martelli 2001, 292; pl. 42:2.
10. 540-530 BC (Hus 1977); 530-520 BC (Camporeale 1969). Stefano Bruni and Anna Maria Sgubini Moretti have questioned the chronology proposed for a certain number of pieces belonging to both the Amsterdam Group and the Villa Giulia Group, stating a post quem non for the period around the year 580 B.C., on the basis of data given by the context of some finds, especially in the case of the sphinx of the Tomb of the Pittore della Sfinge Barbuta (Bruni 2000, 374; Sgubini Moretti 1994, 27 with note 101). This problem will not be discussed here but is one of the most interesting to be solved.

11. A rectangular basis in tufa-stone (A) with evident traces of the plough has a series of mouldings (fascia, half round and plinth) and seems to preserve its original dimensions: 0.22 (height) x 0.58 x 0.41 m. Another basis (B) could not be measured, because it lies under block E (see further on). Yet another kind of basis shows fascia, quarter round and half round (bottom to top) with an overall height of 0.30 m; the length is preserved for 0.57 m, while the original width measures 0.61 m. Another fragment of the same type (D) is less well preserved but shows the same mouldings (0.37 x 0.53, 4 x 0.30 m). An enormous block is cut out in limestone (E) (0.22 x 0.63 x 0.53 m), together with a column drum or rather the basis of a column (F) (diameter 0.32 m) and a small basin (G) of almost trapezoidal shape (0.31 x 0.45 x 0.30 m; depth 0.23 m).


14. Inv. no. 1990.18 st 377. (cf. Martelli in Press 1, Fig. 16).

15. After careful observation we can state that no. 169 did have a similar triple fillet, but it is not well preserved.

16. Hippocamp no. 239 (Fig. 15) and hippocamp no. 241 (Fig. 14) have been attributed to a Maestro di Amburgo – New York in Martelli in Press 1. We may actually say that this Maestro di Amburgo–New York produced the Gruppo di San Donato. A third piece mentioned, now in Berlin (Martelli in Press 1, fig. 18), seems similar, but not identical.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


