New Etruscan Inscriptions on the Web

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New Etruscan Inscriptions on the Web

Dominique Briquel
In the past few years several Etruscan epigraphical documents, heretofore unknown, have appeared on the web. It is not surprising. For centuries Etruscan artefacts have been for sale on the antiquarian market and now Etruscan artefacts for sale are advertised by antiquities dealers on websites, especially on the occasion of auctions. Some of these objects bear inscriptions that have never been seen by Etruscologists and have not been registered in the scientific literature. Therefore it is important that specialists of Etruscan epigraphy and Etruscan language do not neglect the web as a source of information for unpublished inscriptions. Our article focuses on three artefacts: inscribed Etruscan mirrors sold at auction by Christies, one of the world’s leading art dealers (www.christies.com).

1. Among the artefacts sold in an auction at New York’s Rockefeller Plaza on the 9th of December 1999 (sale 9260, antiquities) was an Etruscan mirror depicting the adornment of a seated woman by female attendants. This mirror, according to the description given on the website, was inscribed with didaskalia that indicated the names of three of the figures represented in the scene. No photograph was given of the mirror, but the following description could be read:

AN ETRUSCAN BRONZE MIRROR, circa 4th century B.C.
The cast circular mirror with a concave-sided extension flaring out at the bottom, the ornate handle, rectangular in section, with vertical beaded ridges alternating with grooves along the shaft, with punched dots and circles below the disc extension, and a terminal in the form of a stylized ram’s head, the obverse with a dentate edge, the extension and lower part of the disc engraved with an elaborate volute with stylized palmette, the reverse engraved with a scene of the “Adornment of Turan”, with the goddess seated in profile to the right on a stool with voluted legs, wearing a chiton and a diadem, a himation draped over her left arm, with a standing woman to the left and right, their hands raised to Turan’s head, both nude but for a himation draped over their shoulders, a third nude woman to the right, all wearing coiled bracelets, a standing draped goddess behind Turan between her and the nude woman to the left, a band above inscribed with a retrograde inscription identifying three of the goddesses below: Turan, Uni and Mea, a band of wavy lines above, the border with a scrolling floral motif, the extension with a facing head wearing a Phrygian cap framed by wings. 11 in. (28.6 cm) long.

Lot Notes: The “Adornment of Turan” represents the goddess’ preparation for the “Judgment of Paris.” The three competitors are here identified by the inscription: Turan (Aphrodite), Uni (Hera) and Mea or Menrva (Athena). For a mirror in the Indiana University Art Museum with the same subject, but with a slightly different composition, see no. 4 in De Puma, Corpus Speculorum Etruscorum, USA 1: Midwestern Collections.
Although a photograph of the mirror was not available when it was offered for sale in 1999, the artefact has since reappeared and can now be seen in New York (fig. 1). It belongs to Fordham University and is displayed in the Fordham Museum of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Art, which opened in December 2007. We give here the description of the mirror, as provided by the curator of the Museum, Dr. Jennifer Udell, on the website of Fordham University (http://www.library.fordham.edu/resources/fordhammuseum.html):

ENGRAVED MIRROR WITH TURAN (Aphrodite), UNI (Hera), AND MEA (Athena):

Description: The engraving on this mirror features Uni seated on a stool facing right. She is attended by Turan to her right and Mea behind, and to her left. The identification of the figures is provided by an inscription in retrograde near the top of the image. The order of names corresponds to the placement of the figures within the scene. In addition to Mea and Turan, two other nude attendants assist in the Uni’s adornment. The precise occasion for an elaborate toilette such as the one depicted on this mirror, could have been the wedding of Uni to Tin (Zeus).

Dimensions: Height: 11 inches; Medium and Technique: Bronze; Date and Culture: Etruscan, ca. 4th c. B.C.; Location: Fordham Museum of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Art; Catalogue Number: 7.016.

1The mirror may be viewed online at http://digital.library.fordham.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/Hist&CISOPTR=211&CISOBOX=1&REC=20
Prior to its exhibition in the museum the mirror belonged to the collection of William D. Walsh, who bequeathed it to the University in 2007. “The Fordham Museum of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Art located in the William D. Walsh Family Library is the result of the largest gift of art in Fordham’s history. The collection was donated by Fordham alumnus William D. Walsh and his wife Jane, longtime benefactors of the University.”\(^2\) The mirror was probably purchased by Walsh from Christie’s during the auction of the 9th of December 1999. The website of the Museum indicates that he acquired many of his antiquities from auction houses. “In the early 1970s W. D. Walsh began his own collection, acquiring items only from established galleries and auction houses, such as Christie’s, to make sure that the provenance of each artifact was in good order.”\(^3\)

The disc of the mirror was decorated with five figures. The names of three of them were incised in retrograde direction on a band placed above a central seated woman: turan : uni : mea. We have a typical scène de genre, that of “the adornment of the woman,” which appears on a series of mirrors, sometimes accompanied by inscriptions. The seated woman is often identified as Malavisχ\(^4\) (AT S. 6; OI S. 30, 36, 38, and 40)\(^5\) but occasionally as Turan (OI S. 35, 47). The female attendants are identified as Munθuχ (AT S. 6, OI S. 38), Zipna (OI S. 38), Resχualc (OI S. 36), or even Turan, i.e. the Etruscan goddess of beauty and love, the local equivalent of Aphrodite or Venus (OI S. 36, 38).

On the mirror now in the Fordham Museum, we find the names of three figures: Turan-Aphrodite, Uni-Hera and Mea, whose name is not otherwise attested as such. The name, Mea, has been interpreted as a contracted form of Menerva, the Etruscan equivalent of Latin Minerva and Greek Athena. Therefore, the whole scene was identified either as the adornment of Turan-Aphrodite before the judgment of Paris (Christie’s website) or as the adornment of Uni-Hera before her wedding with Zeus (Fordham Museum’s website). Indeed the distribution of the names with respect to the figures is interpreted in two different ways. In the first case (Christie’s), the seated woman was connected with the last name written on the right, that of Turan: so one was compelled to identify Uni and Mea with the two figures depicted on the left, behind this seated woman, and to admit that none of the standing figures on the right were identified by name, although the name of Turan was written above them. In the second case (Fordham Museum), the seated woman in the center of the composition was identified as Uni, whose name appears on the band between those of Turan and Mea: thus Uni appears surrounded by Mea on the left and Turan on the right, which fits better the disposition of the figures. But the identification of mea as Minerva is questionable.

In the second edition of the Theaurus Linguae Etruscae\(^6\) the name of the goddess Minerva is listed 19 times as menerva, 52 times as menrva, four times as mera, once as merva, while mea remains unattested.\(^7\)

Therefore, it seems better to consider mea not as a reduced form of the name menerva, but as the name of the Etruscan goddess of Victory, Mean, with the final n not written. Thus the scene should rather be interpreted as the adornment of Uni by the goddess of love, Turan, and the goddess of Victory, Mean. The subject is not related to the judgment of Paris. Unlike

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2 See http://www.library.fordham.edu/resources/fordhammuseum.html.
3 Udell 2008: 2-3.
5 Etruscan inscriptions are cited from Rix et al. 1991.
the scene depicted on a mirror in Bloomington (with inscription OI S. 45), which was cited on Christie’s website, where at least Menerva (*menrva*) is provided with her customary attributes (spear, helmet) and the three goddesses are accompanied by Paris (*elcsnte*), in our case, we have generic figures, without any defined characteristics. They were however provided with prestigious names, in a quite arbitrary way, as happens not infrequently on Etruscan mirrors.

2. At the same auction held by Christie’s in New York on the 9th of December 1999 (sale 9260, antiquities), a second Etruscan mirror inscribed with didaskalia was offered for sale. In this case too, no photograph of the artefact was provided. We rely on the description given on the website:

AN ETRUSCAN BRONZE MIRROR, circa 4th century B.C.

The cast circular mirror with a tapering extension, the tang partially preserved, the edges of the obverse with a tongue pattern and fine beading, the extension with a palmette and scrolling, the reverse engraved with a four figure scene, with an embracing couple in the center, the woman standing to the left, her head in three-quarter view, clad in a chiton, a diadem in her hair, wearing a beaded necklace, identified as Turan (Aphrodite) by an inscription above, her youthful lover to the right, his head turned towards her, depicted nude, his left hand raised towards her face, identified as Jason by an inscription to the right of his head, to their left sit a bearded warrior facing right, identified as Achle (Achilles) by an inscription above, fully armed in a corselet, a short chiton below, wearing a crested helmet, and holding a spear in his left hand, his right hand resting on his shield in profile below, the shield with a central rosette framed by various decorative bands, and to the right a standing goddess, identified a Menrva (Minerva) to her right, clad in a chiton and snakey aegis, holding a spear in her right hand, her shield behind her in profile, adorned with a head of Medusa, the scene encircled by an inner border of scrolling florals and an outer border of zigzag lines, with scrolls and a palmette on the extension, the disk deliberately destroyed at the time of burial 9 in. (24.8 cm) long
Here we have a mirror decorated with four standing figures, including a pair of lovers in the center, surrounded on both sides by an isolated figure. The identity of each of the four figures is provided by an inscription. The isolated figure on the right is Menerva (her name was given as menrva), that on the left Achilles (his name was given as acle); in both cases the identification is congruent with the iconography (weapons for Achilles, aegis, spear and shield with head of Medusa for Menerva). The center of the scene is occupied by the lovers: the goddess Aphrodite, whose Etruscan name turun was written above her head, and her young lover. For this last figure, one would expect the name Adonis (Etruscan atunis), who is often represented as Turan’s lover on Etruscan mirrors, but, strangely, if the reading of the inscription given in the description we have quoted is right, we find here Jason, the hero of the conquest of the golden fleece, who had no particular relationship to Aphrodite. But the reliability of the reading of the name provided on Christie’s website is not guaranteed.

Unlike the previous case, the whereabouts of the mirror is now unknown. And since a photograph was not provided, it is impossible to verify the reading. One cannot preclude the possibility that Jason’s name, which appears in various forms on Etruscan artefacts (easun OI G. 24, eiasun Vs S. 21, heiasun AV S.3, beiasun Vc S. 3, hiasunu AT S. 5),8 was read by mistake and that the name of the young man was in fact Adonis. The lack of a transcription of the fourth figure’s name suggests that the author of the site’s description found it difficult to read (for the mirror was damaged and the didaskalia were not necessarily completely preserved). This strengthens the hypothesis that the identification of figure four as Jason is incorrect and that there was confusion between the name easun or a similar form and the name atunis, which could have happened quite easily if the last two letters of the name atunis were missing. A form like atun would not have been too different from eiasun or heasun. Unfortunately, until the mirror is once again made public, the exact form of the fourth name cannot be determined.

8 De Simone 1968: 52-53.
3. A third inscribed mirror appeared four years later, on the 11th of December 2003, at a sale held in New York at Rockefeller Plaza (sale 1314, antiquities). In this case, a photograph was furnished (fig. 2) and the following description was given:

AN ETRUSCAN BRONZE MIRROR, circa 4th century B.C.
Disk-shaped with a slightly concave flange flaring out at the bottom, the obverse with a dentate edge, the reverse incised with Turan (Aphrodite), Atunis (Adonis) and two female attendants, Munow and Turnu, all identified by accompanying inscriptions, Turan depicted seated on a stool, wearing a chiton, a mantle pulled up over the back of her head as a veil, and a suite of jewelry, a swan behind her, holding Atunis across her lap, the youth wearing a mantle draped around his lower body and over his left shoulder, his chest bare, a bulla around his neck, Munow and Turnu seated on either side, each elegantly draped and elaborately bejeweled, Munow holding a flute in each hand, Turnu holding a lyre in her left hand, with seashells scattered in the exergue, enclosed by a long-leafed laurel garland, a palmette on the flange.

93/4 in. (24.8 cm.) high. Acquired by the current owner in 1992.

Fig. 2. Facsimile of engraved mirror with Turan (Aphrodite), Atunis (Adonis) and two female attendants. Drawing by Françoise Ory from photograph published online by Christie’s in December 2003.
The didaskalia turan and turnu were easily verified from the photograph that appeared on the website. But aiunis was not correct. It was a mistake for atunis. The summit of the letter T was perhaps damaged or not clearly distinct (the photograph did not permit a clear view of this letter), thus inducing confusion between T and I. munow (unfortunately this didaskalia was difficult to read on the photograph) is an obvious error for munθχ. The letter theta (written as an O that was not provided with a central point) was confused for the letter omicron, which did not exist in Etruscan, and the Etruscan letter khi (which was of the ϒ type in Etruscan) was confused for the modern letter W, which did not exist in Antiquity. This mirror, which is of high artistic quality, depicted the classical pair of lovers, Turan and Adonis (the goddess being flanked by a swan, as on the famous mirror, now in St Petersburg). The two lovers were complemented by two female figures, one on each side, belonging to the numerous series of Turan’s attendants and acting here as musicians – the figure on the left holding two flutes, the one on the right a lyre. Such a composition is unattested, even though Etruscan mirrors depicting Turan and Adonis are quite common. The figure on the left is identified as Munθuχ (with her name given under the form munθχ, attested by three examples (AT S. 3, 6; OI S. 51), compared with five examples of munθuχ (AT S. 1, OI S. 38, 45)). Munθuχ, whose name means “the one who adorns”, does not appear here provided with an alabastron or some other cosmetic implement as is usually the case, but appears as a musician, positioned in symmetry with the other figure, who is designated as turnu. The name Turnu, on the contrary, was until now known by only one example, and it was a didaskalion of a male figure. It appeared on a mirror found in the necropolis of Castel Viscardo. The Turnu of the mirror from Castel Viscardo was a young winged boy, a kind of Eros. He is positioned on the left side of the disc playing with a iunx, which is a game often associated with love-scenes. He appears behind Apulu, who is facing the pair Turan-Atunis, depicted on the right half of the mirror in a composition strongly reminiscent of that of a mirror from Vulci, which is now in Berlin. So Turnu may be either a male or a female figure. Its variable gender should not be explained as a new example of sex-exchange, a phenomenon attested for some deities and studied by M. Cristofani, but it comes from the fact that turnu is an adjective derived from turan (through an evolutive process turanu > tur(a)nu > turnu) by the adjunction of a suffix -u, which has been compared to the suffix appearing in culθu in relation to culθ and in alpanu/alpnu in relation to alpan. The word turnu means ‘related to Turan’ and it can be applied to various members of the circle of the goddess of love, without any regard to their male or female character.

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9 Gerhard 1867: 322, with OI S. 45.
11 But already on the mirror with the inscription AT S. 1, in Brussels, Munθuχ appeared in an unusual attitude. In that case she was dancing with the Silenus Xelvun.
12 Feruglio 1997.
13 Gerhard 1843: 87-88, plate LXXXIII.
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