Etruscan Architectural Traditions: Local Creativity or Outside Influence?

Ingrid Edlund-Berry

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In 1965 Lucy T. Shoe published the results of her research on Etruscan and Republican Roman Mouldings, begun in the 1930s and continued in the 1950s and 1960s. Based on her study of mainland and Western Greek architectural moldings, she had already come to the conclusion that the Western Greek moldings represented features that were not based on those of the mainland, and that influences from the neighboring architectural traditions in Italy were at play at sites such as Capua, Paestum, and Pompeii. Although her initial interest concerned the study of Greek architecture, she also began to explore the architectural remains of Etruria and Latium and found, much to her surprise, that although there were traits of recognizable Greek influence in Etrusco-Italic architecture, the moldings did not follow suit. As she undertook to study the Etruscan moldings in detail, she discovered that they were fundamentally different from anything Greek, both in terms of proportions and appearance on a building or monument. To mark the most distinctive form of the Etruscan moldings, the characteristic ‘round,’ she labeled it ‘the Etruscan round’ to indicate its uniqueness in comparison with the Greek forms of the round or ovolo. She further realized that whereas Greek and Western Greek moldings can be used to indicate a chronological development, with some regional variations, the Etruscan moldings are tied to the different Etruscan cities and regions, and to a much lesser degree to chronology.

As is familiar to any student of Etruscan architecture, proportions of building elements, and their relation to each other, are distinctive to each type of building as well as to each Etruscan city. When observed at a site, the size of the foundations and the size and proportions of the carved moldings are immediately apparent, but shown in reduced-scale photographs and drawings, this quality is often overlooked. Furthermore, due to technical considerations, the drawings produced in the 1965 edition of ERRM were reduced to half-size or more for the larger moldings, and Shoe’s important thesis of the independence and uniqueness of the Etruscan architectural moldings was therefore difficult to grasp visually, although explained clearly in the text. With the reissue of ERRM this problem has been resolved, and in addition to new sections...
A summary of some of the most significant recent discoveries within the Etrusco-Italic area since 1965 forms a separate chapter of the reissue of ERRM. Following the order of presentation established in ERRM 1965, the categories include Funerary Monuments, Etruscan Round, Cyma Reversa, Cyma Recta, Republican Orders, and Terracotta. Without making any attempt at completeness in documenting all new finds, the two largest categories are those of the Etruscan Round and of Terracotta (that is, terracotta revetments).

Among the examples illustrating the use of the Etruscan round are temple podia from the areas influenced first culturally by the Etruscans and later politically by the Romans (such as Sora, Quadri, Vastogirardi), as well as podium blocks from the north Etruscan site of Poggio Colla (Vicchio di Mugello). Furthermore, the Etruscan round is found in ‘hourglass’-shaped altars (Bologna) and monumental altars (Castro, Pieve Socana, Punta della Vipera), in a wide variety of column bases from Poggio Colla, Acquarossa, Castel di Ieri, and in many of the rock-cut tombs in southern Etruria. Examples of bases with Etruscan rounds and a hawksbeak molding, including the one in terracotta from S. Omobono and others shown in tomb paintings and terracotta reliefs, add to the one from Ara della Regina, Tarquinia, documented in ERRM. Column capitals (if fragmentary sometimes difficult to differentiate from bases) come from Rome, Antenmae, and Acquarossa, in addition to those from rock-cut tombs at Blera and Norchia.

As for terracotta revetments with architectural moldings, ERRM 1965 contained only a sample of the ones known at the time, but these indicated already the specific Etruscan signatures in terms of size, proportions, and the use of strigils on the concave cavetto molding. Discoveries of terracotta frieze plaques with moldings from Murlo allowed Lucy Shoe Meritt to evaluate their form in terms of the relation between the vertical and cavetto elements. Because of the abundance of new discoveries of architectural terracottas the work of many scholars has resulted in publications from conference proceedings such as Deliciae Fictiles and in other studies.

The examples mentioned above support Shoe’s radical thesis of the predominance of the Etruscan round, and of the independence of the Etruscan architectural tradition in the rendering of size and proportions of moldings. Other interpretations have, however, been brought forth, suggesting that the Etruscans in their architecture (as well as in other aspects of their culture) were heavily influenced by the Greek, Western Greek, and Near Eastern traditions.

So, for example, has the monumental tomb complex known as Tumulus II of Melone del Sodo at Cortona been attributed to the workmanship of Ionian architects and artists from Asia Minor. Here, a monumental staircase leads up to a platform for an altar joined to a large tumulus tomb (fig. 1). The staircase, made of sandstone, is flanked by a railing and balustrade with large volutes and palmettes carved in the round. At the foot of the stairs, a rounded volute rests on a block on either side with a lioness (or sphinx?) attacking a human. On the side of the staircase there is a molding placed above three rows of squared sandstone blocks, consisting of a large Etruscan round, placed between a rounded fascia (or hawksbeak?) above, and a shallow hawksbeak below (fig. 2). This set of moldings runs the length of the podium for the staircase, and the Etruscan round and lower hawksbeak continue along the adjoining edge of the tumu-
While there is no question that the sculptural decoration of this staircase and platform reflects Eastern artistic motifs, the combination of the round and a hawksbeak is well known from Etruscan tumulus and square (‘dado’) tombs, and represents a use of the round as a base molding used by Etruscans, but not by Greeks, and here linking a podium with the base of a tumulus tomb.

As noted, however, by Zamarchi Grassi, the plan of the stairs and podium at Cortona bears a strong resemblance to the altar of Poseidon at Cape Monodendri near Miletos. There the moldings consist of an ovolo with an egg-and-dart design with an astragal below, following in the Greek tradition documented by Lucy Shoe Meritt in PGM. If indeed the inspiration for the Cortona tomb has ties with Ionia and a monument such as the altar of Poseidon, we have an interesting example of the kind of translation that took place between the Greek and the Etruscan perception of moldings. In the Greek setting the egg-and-dart ovolo is the expected form, whereas the Etruscan tradition prescribes the use of the round, with or without a hawksbeak. Regardless of the motifs used for both monuments (such as the volutes), the execution of the moldings distinctly reflects the individual tradition within each culture in a way similar to the way in which Ionian and Persian traditions blended in the art of Pasargadae.

In the case of the tumulus and stepped altar complex at Cortona, we are dealing with a single monument within the setting of an Etruscan town and its extra-urban burial area. A different example of a specific use of Etruscan moldings in a context which is both Greek and Carthaginian comes from the sanctuary at Pyrgi (Santa Severa). Here the later of the two temples, temple A, built ca. 460 BC, preserves the plan of a Tuscan temple with three cellas and columns in the pronaos. The plan is thus specifically Etruscan, although (as may be expected) it does not agree fully with the proportions prescribed by Vitruvius. Aside from the plan, however, fragments of molded blocks have been interpreted as a podium block with a square block with a rounded corner forming the base/foundation for a block with a full Etruscan round. The two blocks are of about equal height (less than 0.20 m.) and have been reconstructed as one superimposed on the other. Since the pieces were not found in situ it is not clear how they related to each other, but if both formed part of the podium of the temple as a double round, the pattern has parallels from S. Omobono and Castro.
As interesting, however, as the moldings of temple A at Pyrgi may be to us, what this temple is known for is not these definitely Etruscan-conceived elements but rather the terracotta column plaque showing in low relief the combat of the Seven Against Thebes. Here we have a mixture of a temple plan of Etruscan components, including the moldings, mixed with a Greek mythological motif, like so often in Etruscan architecture. In addition, Pyrgi was known as a sanctuary frequented also by the Carthaginians because of the Punic text recorded on the gold plaques found between temples A and B. The ambience is thus international, but strongly rooted in Etruscan architectural traditions, displayed in the plan and moldings of temple A.

While Lucy Shoe Meritt’s study focuses specifically on the comparison between Greek, Etruscan, and Roman moldings, it is also of importance to examine evidence from the Near East. As Carl Nylander has noted, the use of moldings is a Greek and not a Near Eastern phenomenon, although some examples exist in the architecture of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Syria. One key site is the neo-Hittite palace at Zincirli (Sendschirli), dated to ca. 830 BC, which has given examples of rounded column bases with elaborate relief designs. These bases, and similar examples from other sites have been compared to a sandstone column-shaped cippus from Bologna with alternating moldings of vertical drums, thin fasciae, and pointed rounds. Likewise, Colonna proposes a Syro-Hittite origin for the moldings used in some of the early tumulus tombs at Cerveteri, where the stone base consists of superimposed smaller and larger rounds. Although undoubtedly there are similarities between the Near Eastern and the Etruscan moldings in the overall perception of rounded elements, the Etruscan versions reflect a consistent system of scale and proportions in the profile of each molding, which set them apart from either Greek or Near Eastern counterparts.

As is clear from the many studies of imported and locally made artifacts in Etruria, there was a very strong cultural connection between this part of Italy and the Greeks in the West, the Greeks in mainland Greece, and the peoples of the Near East. The Etruscans eagerly bought and used ‘foreign’ objects, and did not hesitate to make their own adaptations, usually with some changes in medium, composition, and rendering of details. This definite trait in their culture does not preclude, however, local traditions that served as a foundation for the weaving together of artistic and architectural concepts. In the same vein as Etruscans preferred their own local building materials but occasionally imported art works of Greek marble, they also followed a tradition of building techniques based on the work of previous generations. As the building styles changed from simple huts with straw roofs to rectangular houses with tiled roofs, Etruscan architects felt free to experiment with decorative as well as with functional elements. In terms of the architectural moldings, however, regardless of any outside source of inspiration, the Etruscans created a system based on the elements of the basic concave and convex, which consists of features so distinctive that one can immediately recognize the traits of an Etruscan hand, distinctly different from that of a Greek or a Near Eastern architectural tradition. In short, Etruscan architecture was its own master, but formed an integral part in the broader tradition of the cultures of the Mediterranean.
NOTES

1. ERMM 1965. I am honored to dedicate the material presented here to the memory of Lucy Shoe Meritt, colleague and mentor. Her knowledge of the ancient Mediterranean was vast, and her continued interest in new discoveries served as an inspiration to us all. I thank the organizers of the British Museum conference, The Etruscans Now, for providing the opportunity to share so many important aspects of the Etruscan culture with colleagues and friends.

2. PGM 1936; PWGM 1952.


5. In writing this chapter in ERMM 2002 I benefited from the experience and support of Lucy Shoe Meritt, and the generous contributions from colleagues in Italy and elsewhere. This very brief survey is intended as a preliminary discussion to be expanded to a more complete analysis of the Architectural Tradition in Ancient Italy.

6. For bibliographical references for the examples mentioned here, see ERMM 2002.

7. For this base, see ERMM 1965 and 2002, 123, pl. XXXVII,4 and fig. 26.

8. As discussed in the preface to ERMM 1965, the tragic loss of the original drawings for the volume prevented Lucy Shoe Meritt from including as many of the architectural terracottas as she had originally planned.


10. The first conference, Deliciae Fictiles, was held at the Swedish Institute in Rome in 1990, followed by Deliciae Fictiles II at the Dutch Institute in Rome in 1996, and Deliciae Fictiles III at the American Academy in Rome in 2002. The proceedings of the first two conferences have appeared in the Acta Instituti Romani Regni Sueciae, vol. L (1993) and in Scrinium XII (1997) respectively. The proceedings of the third conference are published by David Brown (OxBow Books) in cooperation with the American Academy in Rome.


12. For a detailed description and analysis of this important monument, see Zamarchi Grassi 1992 and Bruschetti and Zamarchi Grassi 1999. The moldings are identified as a hawksbeak (‘becco di civetta’), round (‘toro’), and hawksbeak by Bruschetti and Zamarchi Grassi 1999, 38. I am grateful to Dr. Zamarchi Grassi for pointing out these moldings to me and for her insightful analysis of the monument. During a visit to the monument in June 2003 I was able to view the moldings in person in the company of Dott.ssa Margherita Scarpellini, and was fortunate enough to discuss the stone cutting techniques with Franco Cecchi of the Soprintendenza Archeologica per la Toscana. The examination of the actual blocks suggests that the large round forms the key element of the set, whereas the upper and lower molding form the transition between the upper and lower vertical blocks respectively. While the upper and lower molding resemble a hawksbeak, they are unusually shallow and barely rounded, perhaps suggesting that these parts of the blocks (like others on this monument) were not fully completed.

13. For the transition between the podium/staircase and the tumulus, see the excellent illu-
tration in Bruschetti and Zamarchi Grassi 1999, 38, fig. 38.
16. Zamarchi Grassi 1992, 131. The full publication of this altar is found in Th. Wiegand, Milet Band I, Heft IV, A. von Gerkan, 1915. Der Poseidonaltar bei Kap Monodendri. Berlin. Alessandro Naso has kindly pointed out to me that this altar is not well preserved, and that the reconstruction should be viewed with caution (personal information, December 2002).
17. PGM 1936, pls. III,6 and LXXI,8.
18. See Nylander 1970, 148. As Nylander emphasizes so persuasively, it is not a question of one people’s artistic superiority over the other, but rather the result of a meeting of the minds and a productive collaboration.
21. Thanks to the excellent new illustrated translation of Vitruvius by Ingrid D. Rowland and Thomas N. Howe. 1999. Ten Books on Architecture. Cambridge, we can now appreciate Vitruvius’ goals as an architect and scholar seen in the perspective of archaeological remains.
27. Akurgal 1968, 71-86; Naumann 1971, 131-149. These and other very important examples from the East have been discussed by Naso 1998. For a general discussion of Near Eastern influence on Etruscan architecture, see also Prayon 2001.
30. The comparison between round moldings on the so-called tomb of Gyges from Sardes and on the tumulus from the Sorbo necropolis at Cerveteri, discussed by Naso 1998, 122-128, suggests that the examples from Asia Minor provide important insights into early Etruscan architecture. Full-scale profile drawings and a study of the proportions of these Near Eastern moldings are needed.
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