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The Evidence for Wooden Sarcophagi in Etruscan Tombs

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About the middle of the 4th century BC in the south Etruscan cities, production of stone sarcophagi begins. As well as the prostrate figures on the cover, these often feature paintings or reliefs on the four sides of the case. The first interpretation of this new custom of burying the deceased in richly decorated stone sarcophagi was developed by Reinhard Herbig in 1952. Looking for possible Etruscan forerunners, he could only find the archaic stone sarcophagi of inner Etruria. Although this class of monuments is not particularly convincing, both because of the small number of preserved objects, and the fact that usually influence travels from the open-minded coastal cities to the rural regions of the Etruscan hinterland rather than in the opposite direction, for Herbig a certain continuity was evident. The determinant factor was that in both the archaic and the late classical types wooden chests were imitated.

The obvious possibility that wooden chests were not only imitated, but really used as coffins was not considered by Herbig. Therefore, he looked for the missing link between the archaic and late classical monuments outside Etruria. He referred to finds from southern Russia, Egypt and the near Eastern regions, which could have influenced Etruscan craftsmen. Such examples, according to Herbig, would have provided the impetus to revive a tradition that had been forgotten for more than a century. Of course such a scenario is not impossible per se, but leads inevitably to the question of what kind of burial was practised in the meantime.

For the time between the 6th and the 4th centuries, Herbig suggested burials on wooden beds. His evidence was the extraordinary bronze kline from Tomba Regolini Galassi, discovered in 1836, which has shaped our current concept of a “Totentkline,” as well as the many examples of funeral beds in the form of klinai cut directly out of the rock, typical for Cerveteri, but common also at other sites, and finally the later stone sarcophagi and urns in the form of klinai.

No less convincing are the many representations of wooden klinai in Etruscan wall-
painting, which are illustrating impressively that the rock-cut examples were made according to wooden models. There arises a further question as to whether the idea of a prothesis or of a banquet, be it in daily life on earth or in transcendent al eternity, was intended. This may be left undecided, since there are examples in painting and sculpture of both ideas.

In addition, as also pointed out by Herbig, in Cerveteri there appear quite early the so-called letto a sarcofago in the form of a chest, onto which the bedding for the corpse was carved and which shows the characteristic pediments on both ends.3

We find a completely different situation in the painted tombs of Tarquinia. Rock-cut beds like those of Cerveteri exist only in the tombs of the 7th and early 6th centuries.4 These beds, according to their height,5 look more like simple blocks, benches or steps, since they never show legs or other characteristic details of furniture. Only the pillow-like elevations occasionally found at one end of the structure, as we see for example in the Tomba delle Pantere (fig. 1), may give the impression of a bed.

What has not been taken into consideration in this discussion up to now is the fact, that there are often found rectangular cavities cut into the floor of the tomb chambers or into the surface of the rock benches, particularly in many Tarquinian tomb chambers from the 6th to the 4th centuries (fig. 2-3). As a rule, four of these cavities form a regular rectangle on the ground plan. In general they are called “base marks” (German “Standspuren,” Italian “impronte”) and are explained by the setting up of wooden beds or sarcophagi. However neither a kline nor a sarcophagus would leave an impression of a depth of ten centimetres or more in rocky ground. The cavities cannot be explained as traces of weathering or of use; they are certainly hewn out intentionally before the burial.6

What purpose do these cavities serve? The finds from Etruria are not of any help in answering this question. There is extremely little evidence to indicate what occupied these spaces. Therefore, we should look for parallels in other areas of the Mediterranean. Intact wooden sarcophagi, like other artefacts of organic material, have been primarily preserved in Egypt and Southern Russia, because of the favourable climatic conditions. However,
traces of them survive from everywhere in the Greek world.¹ Normally, wooden coffins take the form of rectangular chests with four legs or feet, so that a space of about 10 to 30 cm. remained between the body of the chest and the floor. This detail of construction was essential for real chests, which were used in everyday life as storage bins for clothes or food. The distance to the floor would allow sufficient ventilation to help preserve the contents. Although this would not be of any practical use for a chest used as a coffin, it was evidently impossible to do without the legs as a significant symbolic element.⁹

The connection between everyday and sepulchral furniture becomes even more obvious, if we consider a strange custom documented in the necropolis of Abusir in Egypt. Some undisturbed burials in Greek wooden sarcophagi have been preserved in the dry sand of the desert. The legs of

figure 2 – Tarquinia, Tomba del Frontoncino with four cavities in front of the back wall. 500 B.C.

figure 3 – Tarquinia, Chamber of Tomba del Triclinio with four cavities in front of the left wall. 480 B.C.
most of these were sawn off and buried separately beside the coffin. From this we can deduce that during the funeral ceremony the sarcophagi still showed their usual appearance, i.e., the form of a chest, while afterwards they slid down into the grave without legs ‘on their belly’, so to speak. This custom has hitherto been explained as a measure to prevent the bottom of the chest breaking because of the weight of the covering sand. However, it is uncertain whether this practice was simply in response to a practical problem, or if it reflects more metaphorical considerations. In either case, it seems that by removing the legs from the chest, the original function was lost and a new function was created. This change of function probably reflects transformation from life to death.

The theories developed for the finds in Egypt can be adapted to the situation in Tarquinia. Instead of sawing off the legs of the chest, they are here sunk into the ground. So the bottom of the chest rested in both cases directly on the ground. Since sarcophagi in Etruscan tomb chambers were free standing and not covered by earth, the problems encountered at Abusir cannot have been the determining factor. However, whereas the coffins of Abusir all contained well-preserved mummies, in the humid tomb chambers of Etruria decomposition and putrefaction were inevitable: the breaking of the coffin was predictable.

So, although the immediate reason to support the bottom of the chest in Tarquinia was not the same as in Abusir, the aim may have been similar: to allow the sarcophagus to remain intact as long as possible so as to guarantee the undisturbed eternal rest of the deceased.

In other cemeteries all over the Mediterranean (e.g. Satricum, Carthage, Vroulia on Rhodes, and Manduria) there are often four cavities in the four corners of simple cist graves. Here too, one could lower the sarcophagus so that the bottom touched the ground. In addition many of these tombs contained remains of wooden planks and bronze nails. Thus, they provide further arguments for the use of wooden sarcophagi in Tarquinia, at least in those tombs which have the four cavities.

However a question still remains, as to why a sarcophagus was first constructed elaborately in form of a chest with four legs, which later on were sawn off (Abusir) or hid-
den in the earth (Tarquinia), instead of being made as a simple case without legs. It seems that the form of a chest and the concepts inherent to it were extremely important. This is also demonstrated by the fact that during the 4th century, when the wooden chests were transformed into stone, the legs or feet of the furniture were still retained although they no longer served any functional purpose. The allusion to the original furniture construction was so important, that they were never abandoned.

Elfriede Brümmer, in 1985, collected relevant examples of the cavities for wooden sarcophagi from non-Etruscan regions. But to my knowledge these marks were not noticed and consequently not discussed by Etruscologists. Otherwise it might have been remarked upon much earlier that wooden klinai could not have caused the “base marks,” still less the cavities in the rocky ground.

Of course I do not deny that dead bodies were occasionally put on klinai. But these have not left any traces. Moreover, we have to consider that burials on wooden klinai brought about exactly that result which was to be avoided by setting down the sarcophagi on the ground. The wooden klinai would soon have collapsed, allowing the corpse together with the corredi to fall to the ground. Bronze klinai which remained solid for centuries, such as that in the Tomba Regolini Galassi have not been found in Tarquinia.

Only in a few tombs of the 5th and 4th centuries do we find traces on the walls of stone benches, about 40 cm. high (for example the Tomba della Caccia al Cervo and Tomba Giustinianii) (fig. 4). It is very likely that in these cases additional structures on higher legs had been mounted. On the other hand these examples clearly show that wooden klinai were not suitable for burials because of the above mentioned process of decay if they had no further support by a high stone-base. It may be that it was precisely the practice of setting wooden sarcophagi into the ground that first suggested the idea to use stone benches as an additional support for wooden klinai.

Wooden klinai or wooden chests obviously brought the same problems of preservation with them, particularly since they were used for burials in humid chamber tombs, but these would have affected chests less than klinai. Therefore, when interpreting ambiguous findings, we should consider that these might be the remains of a wooden sarcophagus, rather than preferring to interpret all finds as the remains of klinai, as has usually been the practice until now.

One example of this practice is an unpainted chamber tomb in Tarquinia, published by Mengarelli in 1900. Here the four cavities on the middle section of a stone bench in the shape of a horseshoe were filled with remains of wood and bronze nails, which were declared by Mengarelli, without any further evidence, to be the remains of a kline. But as we have seen, a sarcophagus is much more probable. It was placed in the middle of the back wall exactly in the field of vision of whoever stepped into the chamber. A similar situation can be reconstructed from the four cavities on a bench, also horseshoe-shaped, in the late archaic Tomba del Cacciatore (fig. 5). This effect of a large sarcophagus, placed in the centre of the back wall, is preserved, in stone, in the early Hellenistic Tomba Giglioli.

Another example which requires reinterpretation is the Tomba dei Demoni as published by National Geographic in 1988. The detailed illustration shows one idea for a reconstruction of an Etruscan funeral ceremony. However, this colourful reconstruction
figure 5 – Tarquinia, Tomba della Caccia al Cervo, cavities at the sides of the benches. 450 B.C.
does not include sarcophagi, which are indicated, once again, by the cavities for at least eight wooden feet in front of the right section of the back-wall.  

After these considerations of the correct interpretation of the archaeological findings, we should consider the further consequences. Ursula Höckmann was the first to point out convincingly that bronze objects found in the tombs of Perugia did not belong to normal furniture, but to wooden sarcophagi, for which she offered a plausible reconstruction. Alessandro Naso directed attention to all kind of remnants and objects which could have belonged to wooden sarcophagi. One example is the large ornamental bronze nails, decorated with the head of Acheloos, and with the remains of wood attached, from Civitavecchia. To this I would add the recently published examples of ornamental bronze nails in the museum of Tarquinia which show exactly the same subjects as the later decoration on the pediments of stone sarcophagi, i.e. heads of maenads, satyrs and lions.

The last example may lead us to assume a certain continuity between wooden to stone sarcophagi. The soundness of this hypothesis might be supported by the following remarks.

It has always been noticed that stone sarcophagi, particularly the early examples, show elaborate paintings of high quality (fig. 6). The subjects and technique of these paintings are quite different from the tomb paintings of the same period. Until now there has been no satisfactory explanation for these phenomena, but if we accept the continuity, already mentioned, then painted wooden sarcophagi become a possible forerunner for painted stone sarcophagi. The fact that paintings as well as bronze applications are a common way of decorating wooden chests is demonstrated by the many examples preserved in Egypt and Russia. On the other hand, a recent find of an archaic board of the early 6th century BC from Samos painted in the white-goat-style, once again reveals that painting wooden objects was not unknown to the Greeks.

The argument is further supported by the fact that the names of the deceased were regularly inscribed on the stone sarcophagi, but are completely missing on painted tombs until the 4th century. So we would have to assume that the most magnificent specimens of Etruscan funeral art - the painted tombs of Tarquinia - would appear to be “nameless.” Although this phenomenon contradicts everything we know about ancient, especially
Etrusco-Roman funeral traditions, it has rarely been discussed. However, it is possible that wooden sarcophagi featuring names, and perhaps even official titles, could have filled this gap between the archaic and classical periods.

From the 5th century onwards in the painted tombs of Tarquinia a third kind of burial is found, the so-called *loculi*. It was always suggested that the dead bodies were wrapped in a large cloth and then laid down directly onto the *loculi*. This would be very similar to a laying out of the body on a *kline*. Indeed, in Tomba della Pulcella the *loculus* is designed as a matrimonial bed, richly equipped with embroidered clothes and pillows, decorated with two flying Erotes who hold a blanket to cover the dead couple (fig. 7).

On the other hand, in the Tomba dei Pignoi we can see clearly that the two *loculi* were prepared to hold wooden sarcophagi: the recesses on the left and the right end show that here a sarcophagus with feet was pushed in. And furthermore plaster and painting only appear on the upper sections of the *loculus’* walls; so we have to assume that the lower sections were hidden by wooden sarcophagi.

As we have seen, burial customs in Etruria and especially the painted tombs of Tarquinia reveal a larger variety than hitherto expected. The evidence for wooden sarcophagi in most of the painted tombs should make us more aware of the problems arising from the lack of preserved organic materials such as wood, bone or textiles and of the complexity of trends in a changing society like that of the Etruscans during the 4th century BC. However, we also need to be more cautious in distinguishing the different ideas the Etruscans might have had of eternal rest, particularly when considering burials of the archaic period.

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NOTES

3. See e.g. Steingräber 1979: Regolini Galassi: pl. 1; rock-cut: pl. 34-37, 39, 42.2, 43-44); sarcophagi and urns: pl. 21-26; wall-painting: pl. 7-9; letto a sarcofago: pl. 38,2; 39,1; 40,1.
4. E.g. Steingräber 1986, Cat. No. 51 (Tomba del Cacciatore), Cat. No. 52 (Tomba della Capanna), Cat. No. 80 (Tomba dei Leoni Rossi), Cat. No. 85 (Tomba Marchese), No. 86 (Tomba del Mare), Cat. No. 96 (Tomba delle Pantere), Cat. No. 120 (Tomba dei Tori), Cat. No. 122 (Tomba dei Tritoni), Cat. No. 133 (Tomba 939), Cat. No. 139 (Tomba 1646) and many more.
5. i.e. if they are 80 to 110 cm high, I would call them blocks; if they are 40-80 cm high, I would call them benches, if they are 10 to 40 cm high, I would call them low benches or steps.
6. I cannot give a complete list of all the tombs in which cavities are found, nor can I give their measures. Since they were mostly filled with earth in the past they were only occasionally documented in the publications. Most of the tombs were cleaned down to the rocky ground, only recently, so that today the cavities are more clearly visible. It is often obvious that in one and the same tomb these cavities are not of exactly the same size, perhaps in some cases due to the fact that the borders were damaged in modern times. The slightly different depth of the holes may indicate that the sarcophagi were not placed directly on the rock, but were instead placed on a layer of earth to even out the irregular rocky ground.

Here I list some examples of tombs from the end of the 6th century B.C. that contained one or two wooden sarcophagi:

**Tomba del Topolino:** On each side of the chamber four holes along the side walls: Left: 28x30 cm; 26x26cm; 22x37 cm; 23x 6 cm; right: 23x29 cm, 31x31 cm; 22x31 cm, 21x38 cm.

**Tomba della Caccia e Pesca:** Four holes on the left along the back wall: 36x27cm, 37x25 cm, 37x29 cm, 36x27 cm.

**Tomba del Fiore di Loto:**
Four holes along the left wall: 22x38 cm, 21x40 cm, 21x45 cm, 22x38 cm.

**Tomba degli Auguri:**
On each side of the chamber four holes along the side walls: left: 18x35 cm, 29x33cm, 34x24 cm, 33x25 cm; right: 30x23 cm, destroyed, 26x35 cm, 25x30 cm.

**Tomba del Vecchio:** Four holes along the left wall: 20x35cm, 18x36 cm, 30x44 cm, 20x35 cm; the depth of the cavities is ca. 19 cm. The size of the wooden chest was about 210 x 99 cm.

In **Tomba della Nave** the excavators found a simple stone sarcophagus in nenfro on one side and the four cavities for a wooden sarcophagus along the other side. See Moretti 1961, 13 fig. 3,18.

7. I mean findings like those mentioned by Mengarelli (s.n. 16) and Naso (s. n. 21).
11. Watzinger 1905, 2; Brümmer 1985, 165.
12. Gnade 1992, 25 - 31, fig. 19, 43, 51; Cintas 1951, 33; Cintas 1965, 204-206; Steingräber 2000, e.g. 94, 117.
14. As was pointed out by Colonna 1997, the corpse of the lady in Tomba Regolini-Galassi was not even buried on the bronze kline.
16. Mengarelli 1900, 565 fig. 5, 568.
17. Steingräber 1986, Cat. No. 51, 295 (Tomba del Cacciatore); Cat. No. 69, 309 pl. 79 (Tomba Giglioli).
19. Cataldi Dini 1989, fig. 107; 153. She interprets four of the eight “impronte” as “incassi” for a wooden kline, while the other four, with a shorter distance between them, were for a wooden offerings table. However, I believe that on the right there stood the wooden chest for an adult person (ca. 180 x 80 cm) and close to it a smaller sarcophagus for a child (ca. 130 x 75 cm).
20. Höckmann 1982, 47 fig. 32, 49, 53 fig. 35, 59 fig. 39.
23. E.g., sarcophagus of the Amazons (Firenze, Museo Archeologico Nazionale), Bocci 1960 pl.1-5; sarcophagus of the priest (Tarquinia, Museo Nazionale): Blanck 1982, pl. 1 – 12; sarcophagus with hunting scenes in a landscape (Tarquinia, Museo Nazionale Inv. n. 9789): here fig. 6.
24. The board will be published by Helmut Kyrieleis. For other examples from the 6th century b.c. see Scheibler 1994, 94-96.
27. Most striking remains the example of the unique terracotta-sarcophagus “dei Leoni” from the Procoio di Cerveteri, dated to about 600 BC, which is on a stone bench in the form of a kline: Micozzi 1996, fig. 6.
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