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Murlo, Images and Archaeology

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*Murlo, Images
and Archaeology*

BY ANNETTE RATHJE

The so-called Upper Building, found during the American excavations on the plateau of Piano del Tesoro at Poggio Civitate (Murlo) near Siena in Tuscany, has received a well deserved position in Etruscan studies for its architectural plan and its spectacular terracotta decoration.

Although this building, or single pieces of its decoration, is pictured in every handbook on the Etruscans, we still lack a proper archaeological publication of the complicated stratigraphy of the site, which would allay the doubts and misunderstandings that have arisen regarding this important complex. This situation has been highlighted by Nancy de Grummond:¹ we are short of plans and documentation of the various phases of the site; and we are discussing in circles, not even using the same terminology. As I am not in a position to impose a uniform system, for this occasion I use the neutral names of the buildings based on their stratigraphy.

The hill site of Poggio Civitate, Murlo is strategically important in the landscape and must have had regional importance, controlling the Ombrone valley. However, the huge building does not seem to have been as isolated as is usually stated.² The intentional destruction of the building around 550/530 BC, is another factor that is less well understood than is generally stated, and I agree with the scepticism expressed by Nancy de Grummond regarding the ritual demolition of the building.

Architecturally, this grand complex is almost square and consists of four aisles (measuring ca. 60 x 60 m,) around a courtyard (measuring ca. 60 x 60 m.), of which three sides are porticoed. Remains of foundation walls, beaten earth floors, pisé walls and fragments of terracotta roof tiles, revetments and acroteria were found. It must be stressed that great care was taken over the construction of this building.³

The building has recently been compared to Neo-Assyrian palaces, such as the ceremonial House of King Sanherib in Assur. The dimensions and orientation of the two buildings are nearly identical and both have a central courtyard flanked by internal porti-

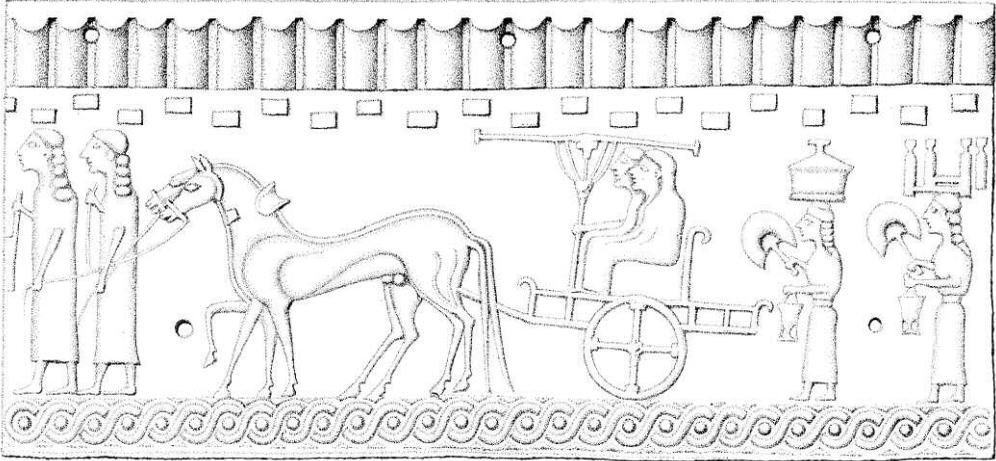


figure 1

coes.⁴ Prayon states that “when considering the external appearance of these buildings, we are left with few, if any, similarities.”⁵

I have already suggested, however, that we should include the terracotta friezes in this comparison.⁶ Prayon focuses on the open central room at Murlo which forms part of an Etruscan tri-partite nucleus, and the rectangular construction in front of it, generally believed to be a sacellum. Nevertheless, we do not know if this rectangular enclosure was covered; nor do we know if it ever belonged to the early 6th century Upper Building, to a later part of the 6th century BC, or even to its 7th century predecessor (which has now been identified as yet another tri-partite building).⁷

My aim is to discuss the significance of the frieze that adorned the 6th century Upper Building, which has become best known for its roof-decoration. The famous acroteria, representing seated females and males, have been placed in couples on the northern flank “perhaps separated by the standing statues, or placed in larger groups of seated figures with standing figures at the end.”⁸ All elements of the roof have very recently been studied by Nancy Winter who links these architectural terracottas to the exiled Bacchiads and their descendants.⁹

The frieze-plaques with figured scenes are not an integral part of the roof, so we do not know where they were set up, whether below the roof, at the eye level of a standing human, or as a decorative band in the middle of the wall.¹⁰ The frieze was made up of four motifs representing a horse race, a banquet, a procession and an assembly. Of the approximately 2000 fragments that survive, more than 55% has been intentionally moved from the destruction layer (that is, from the place where they fell when the building collapsed). So all that can tentatively be concluded is that the horse race plaques are abundant on the west side of the complex towards the courtyard and at on its eastern external side; the banquet plaques seem to have been at the northern external side; the procession plaques were on the southern flank, towards the courtyard; and the assembly plaques in the court-

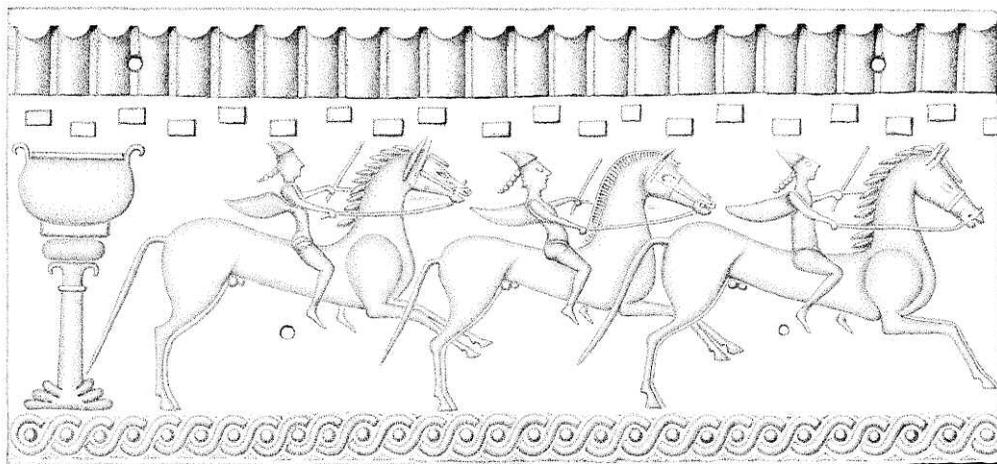


figure 2

yard and on the northern side. This information was deduced from a study of the fragments found in situ and from the terracotta dumps west of the ager and fossa.¹¹

FIGS. 1-4: THE FOUR FRIEZE MOTIFS REPRESENTING: HORSE RACE, BANQUET, PROCESSION AND ASSEMBLY.

Since its first publication, the frieze has been discussed in several articles by M.C. Root, P. Small, T. Gantz and J. MacIntosh.¹² A sometimes heated debate has been in progress for some years about the interpretation of the images represented on the frieze-plaques. They have been viewed as the first in a typological series of terracotta revetment plaques, known from later buildings at other sites and made in a different style. Superficially they may look very alike, but if one looks carefully at the evidence one discovers that the plaques from Murlo are unique in their detail (difficult to create in terracotta), as well as in some of the motifs. I believe that they were deliberately chosen to reflect a specific ideology. I have argued that we must act as the 'decoding receiver' when looking at these images, and have pleaded for a view that unites the different scenes in a way that sees them as a narrative. Having looked through all the fragments in situ,¹³ I have also come to the conclusion that new drawings are needed to achieve a proper assessment.

It is significant how women are prominent in these images: they are major characters in three of the friezes. A woman is one of the reclining couple to the left in the banquet scene, another woman is transported on a cart in the procession, and third a woman is enthroned at the assembly. These women must be seen as more than just mothers, wives, daughters and sisters to the ruling men.¹⁴ There are representations of symbols of status: metal hemispherical cups and the cauldron on its stand; servants; thoroughbred horses; fans; the parasol. Rank is shown by the throne, the folding chairs and footstools, the cart and the parasol, the lituus, the weapons and the double axe. Ritual is suggested by the vases (chal-

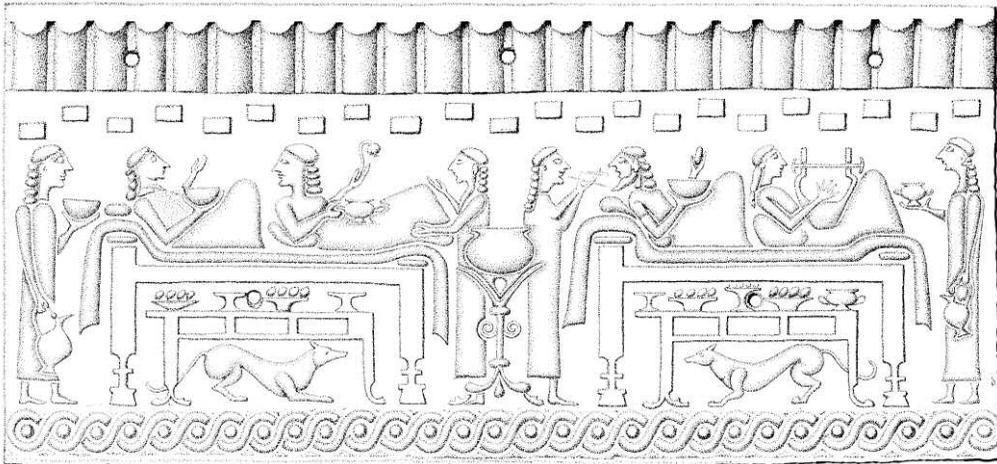


figure 3

ices) borne by the female servants in the procession and in the assembly. The luxury and opulence displayed in these friezes connect them to a style of life belonging to the 7th century BC, depicted by the rich tombs of the principes in central Italy.¹⁵ None of the friezes indicate a setting.

Indications of a luxurious life-style pervade the banquet, with its music, ivory(?) furniture and banquet equipment. The hemispherical bowls held by the male participants of this feast are also found on Near Eastern architectural and ivory reliefs showing similar scenes, where they illustrate a corresponding use of the bowl in an elitist context in that region.¹⁶ Furthermore, this type of bowl seems to have had a ceremonial significance.¹⁷ On the banquet frieze, the female participants and the (female?) musician hold Ionian cups, objects that are now also considered to be ceremonial¹⁸. The Ionian cups on the frieze have been supposed to be ceramic products, but they, too, may be made of metal.¹⁹ Our understanding of the relative use of pottery and metal vessels has been distorted by the lack of method in early excavations, and the deplorable criminal activity which continues in the antiquities trade. However, recent excavations provide us with more information about metal banquet equipment, for instance the objects found in the fabulous princely tomb from Morelli, in the territory of Chiusi, splendidly exhibited in the local Museo Civico Archeologico delle Acque at Chianciano Terme (a reconstruction can be seen at <http://www.Chianciantoterme.com/museo/etrusco/museo-it.htm>).

FIG. 2: THE BANQUET.

Banquet equipment like that represented on the frieze has actually been found at the site, with the exception of the cauldron stand.²⁰ This leads to the conclusion that the representations symbolize the actual banquets that took place in this building. The image shows a courtly setting of dignified behavior and ritual, well known from the Neo-Assyrian palaces.

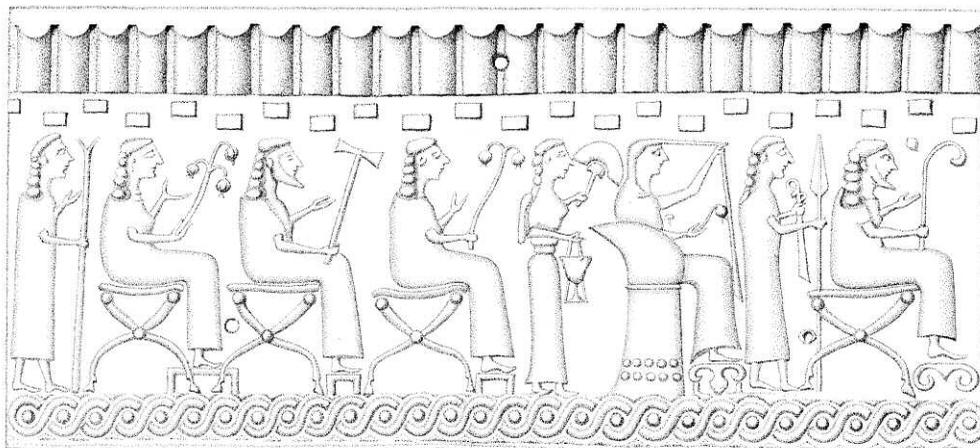


figure 4

The banquet scene has most usually been compared to the banquet scenes known from Corinthian kraters, mostly found in Italy.²¹ The “Greekness” of this frieze has always been emphasised: “l’iconografia delle lastra di Murlo è autenticamente greca in tutti i suoi particolari anche minimi”²² and “La moda del cratere figurato corinzio, anch’essa risalente alla prima metà del VI secolo, si inserisce – attraverso la funzione stesso del vaso e le immagini rappresentate – nella esaltazione dello stile di vita aristocratico. Quel repertorio di immagini, prodotto principalmente per l’esportazione verso l’occidente, bene si prestava ad essere assunto come filo conduttore nella decorazione architettonica dei templi e palazzi d’Etruria.”²³ But the banquet from Murlo differs from the banquets seen on the Corinthian kraters. Only on the Erythios krater from Caere in the Louvre (E 635) is there a cauldron on its stand, and this is below the handle! No Corinthian krater shows the musicians, the servants or the cupbearers. The banqueters on the Murlo Frieze recline in the same way as the person on a Phoenician bowl from Salamis, now in the British Museum,²⁴ in contrast to the Corinthian banquet scenes, where the reclining participants face the opposite direction.

According to Payne,²⁵ Corinthian banquets reflect the Neo-Assyrian banquets, and I have insisted on comparing the Murlo Banquet with the famous garden party of King Assurbanipal and the “Lady of the Palace,” his queen Ashurshurat, a central scene in a larger wall decoration in a private room in the palace.²⁶ They are not identical, of course, since banquets are intrinsically linked to cultural identity. However, all three representations are from areas that form part of the Mediterranean koine. The Neo-Assyrian period shows an integration of non-Assyrians from throughout the Empire into all levels of Assyrian society, and the royal party seen at Nimrud has been identified with the Phoenician feast of the marzeah known from the Old Testament (Amos 6:4-6). The time has come to consider the complexity of the various court-societies in the Near East – even the presence of the ladies at banquets has been suggested to originate from this Eastern world.²⁷ I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere the way the banquet reflected elite self-identity in the Mediterranean.²⁸

The representation of the procession is more problematic. A cart with two (?) females is drawn by two males. The first male carries an object that seems to me to be a butcher's knife, and the second carries a spit(?). Behind the person identified as a woman in the cart is another woman(?) holding a parasol (perhaps a servant). The last two figures are servants, who carry a pyxis and a chair on their heads, and hold ritual chalices which are being fanned. I have suggested that the knife and the spit allude to the banquet, but even now these objects are usually ignored, and they are often omitted from copies of the old drawings.²⁹ I prefer to see the woman on the cart as a very high-status woman with a specific position in the ceremonies that took place at Murlo, as only very few women were allowed the privilege of a cart. The servants fanning chalices refer to Neo-Assyrian representations as has been shown by Helle Salskov Roberts.³⁰

FIG. 3: THE PROCESSION

The assembly represents high ranking people and here native symbols of power, the lituus and the double axe, are combined with oriental symbols of power and display, folding chairs, footstools, throne and servant fanning ritual chalices. Comparison has been made between the "princely" tombs of Etruria and the Neo-Assyrian royal tombs; the objects from the latter represent royal power and dignity: the throne, splendid tables, banquet equipment, a "bed," weapons of parade and cart.³¹ Power has many aspects and may be divided into control over economic resources, decision-making in the public sphere, ideology and social relationship.³² This diversity should be sought in the images of power, too. The power expressed on the Murlo friezes embraces religious, political, judicial and military power ultimately derived from the protection of the ancestors, who are represented on the roof.

FIG. 4: THE ASSEMBLY

The figures on the friezes have been interpreted as gods, which raises the question of whether these figures are mortal or immortal. Recently A. Tuck has argued that the assembly frieze represents a *hieros gamos* (Tuck 2006). In my opinion it is the people of Murlo who have chosen to represent themselves as god-like women and men. It is important to stress that in these representations no references to mythology have been discovered, although myth has been adopted in central Italy at this time (Menechetti 1994). This is in contrast to, for instance, the imagery on the oinochoe from Tragliatella and the architectural terracottas from Acquarossa and Rome. At Murlo we are dealing with a self portrait of a lifestyle involving prestigious activity. This is indeed a world in which concepts such as power and status are multifunctional,³³ and it is extremely difficult to gather whether the iconography belongs to the public or private, sacred or mundane sphere.

Without doubt, somewhere in the building banquets were held as is proved by the banquet equipment found, both in connection with the "Upper Building" and its 7th century predecessor. The northern rooms have been suggested as the location, and the courtyard is another good proposal. I still believe that all four friezes represent ceremonial life, actual

events that took place in Murlo, so we must continue to question the nature of the building.

The building has been seen as the precursor to sanctuaries with monumental structures. The excavator, Kyle Phillips, argued for identification as a political meeting place of an Etruscan league.³⁴ Mauro Cristofani saw it as a domestic residence of a powerful leader.³⁵ It has also been suggested that “the complex belongs to a type of political formation involving extra urban residence-cum-ritual structure, residence or palace of an aristocratic clan or dynasty,”³⁶ or that it is a forum.³⁷ Most recently it has been suggested that the design and plan of the building indicate a mercantile complex, that is a *macellum*.³⁸ Nancy de Grummond has rightly highlighted the circularity of arguments which allow interpretation to overrule the actual archaeological data, which has, in my opinion, made this extraordinary site infamous. The current fashion, to interpret sites on the basis of ancient texts rather than archaeological finds, reminds me of early Biblical Archaeology: the Holy Book in the right hand, and the shovel in the left. How can it be right to approach the Etruscan reality of Murlo of the Orientalizing period from ancient sources such as Virgil, which are later in date, and are primarily concerned with Rome?

If this site is to be called a *regia*, we must stress the influence of the court societies, transmitted directly through contact between the elite, craftsmen and traders, and indirectly in various ways. Foreigners were present in Etruscan society, and although the traces are not conspicuous, we must still hunt for them. It was not just portable objects that were influenced, as can be seen by the architectural and sculptural examples. Furthermore, we cannot explain the Etruscan choice of Near Eastern forms and iconography purely because they were exotic, or readily available on objects from the minor arts. Instead, it is clear that the Etruscans were highly selective and made conscious choices.³⁹

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NOTES

1. De Grummond 1997.
2. De Grummond 1997, 27-28.
3. Nijboer 1998, 164.
4. Prayon 2001, 341-343, figs. 3a-b.
5. Prayon 2001, 341.
6. Rathje 1995, 174.
7. Tuck, 2002.

8. Edlund-Berry 1993b, 119.
9. Winter 2005, 243-44.
10. Cf. the reasons given by Strazzulla 1993 for the placement of the Campana plaques from the Palatine. I certainly agree with Ch. and Ö. Wikander when criticizing “the stylistic analysis of individual members of a roof.” Wikander 2006, 42.
11. von Mehren 1993.
12. For bibliography see Edlund-Berry 1993a; for a more detailed analysis of the entire decoration see Menichetti 2002,82- 87.
13. Rathje 1993.
14. Rathje 2000, Rathje in press.
15. Rathje 1995, 170-171.
16. Rathje 1995.
17. Rathje & Wriedt Sørensen 1995, 1876.
18. Poletti Ecclesia 2002.
19. See Wriedt Sørensen 2001:24, fig.4d.
20. Berkin 2003, 119-129.
21. Payne 1931, nos. 780, 990, 1181, 1182, 1191, 1441,1455,1460,1464 cf. 707,717, 1030, 1359.
 Cf. Dentzer 1982, 76-87. As for a more recent analysis of the Corinthian craters, see Cristofani and Martelli 1996.
22. Torelli 1997, 93.
23. Bruno d’Agostino 1991, 226.
24. Karageorghis 1993.
25. Payne 1935, 53-54.
26. Rathje 1995, 173.
27. Amann 2001, 140.
28. Rathje 2005, 215-223.
29. Torelli 1997; Menichetti 1994; Menichetti 2002; Torelli 2000. However the splendid photo in Naso 2000, 127 shows clearly that the men are carrying something.
30. Salskov Roberts 1988.
31. Kistler 2001, 223.
32. Humphreys 1998.
33. New excavations reveal symbols of power, as for instance the spectacular finds at Casale Marittima. Esposito 1999.
34. Phillips 1993, 45-48, 80.
35. Cristofani 1975, 11.
36. Torelli 2000, 68 and 72.
37. De Grummond 1997, 36-38.
38. Macintosh Turfa and Steinmayer 2002.
39. Serra Ridgway 2002.

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