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The Vegetal Goddess in the Tomb of the Typhon

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The Hellenistic Tomb of the Typhon, discovered in 1832 and located in the Monterozzi necropolis in Tarquinia, housed the burials of the aristocratic Pumpu family and may have been used from the third quarter of the third century BC until the Roman Imperial period.¹ This tomb’s painted decoration includes a marine frieze, a procession of men being led by demons, and, on opposite sides of one pillar, a winged, anguiped male and a winged, vegiped female.² This winged Rankingottin or Rankenfrau (Fig. 1), referred to by Steingraber as a possible Lasa or by Brendel as a caryatid, will be the focus of this article, for she seems more significant than either of these labels indicates.³ Discussions of this tomb often dwell on the relationship between the “Typhon” and the anguiped giants of the Altar of Zeus and Athena at Pergamon and do not account for the iconographic predecessors of the vegetal goddess.⁴ The importance of this figure will be demonstrated, and a proposal for her identity will be made, after relating her iconography to the conventions used in depicting vegetal goddesses in contexts from the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions.

The image of a plant-human hybrid can be found in many areas in the Mediterranean world and appears “from the Crimea to South Italy, from Egypt to Macedonia, from Asia to Albania and Etruria.”⁵ Representations of this goddess

figure 1 – Line Drawing of the Vegetal Goddess in the Tomb of the Typhon (After Brendel 1995, fig. 319)
follow a general pattern. She often fulfills an ornamental function and is depicted frontally and symmetrically with the human portion of her body forming between volutes and acanthus tendrils. The upper part of the figure is human and often naked, and the lower portion is either covered from the waist down by leaves creating a skirt for the figure or acanthus tendrils that take the place of legs. She sometimes wears a polos or is winged. Stoop cites numerous iconographic variations of this goddess and notes that the “most striking variation” occurs in her use as the decoration of a capital supporting architectural elements. Interestingly, he does not refer to the similar function of the vegetal goddess in the Tomb of the Typhon.

The origins of the vegetal goddess have not been settled but seem closely tied to that of its pendant figure in the tomb, the so-called Typhon. Using the motif of the anguiped giant as their primary evidence, Pallottino and Steingraber state that the Typhon and the vegetal goddess are motifs from Asia Minor with Pergamon as the most probable site of origin and the Great Altar as a precedent. Curtius proposes an Eastern origin for this goddess, and Stoop suggests Asia Minor, without specifically mentioning Pergamon, as the place of her origin. In discussions of a royal Thracian tomb near the village of Sveshtari that contains a similar goddess, Boardman proposes that the vegetal goddess is a Thracian motif, while Valeva places the goddess’ origin in Greece, specifically Athens.

In a recent article, de Grummond discusses the possible connections between Pergamon and the Tomb of the Typhon in relation to the early appear-

\[ \text{figure 2 – Silver Plaque from the Bomford Collection (Illustration by C. Buisson)} \]

\[ \text{figure 3 – Bucchero Kyathos Handle with “Potnia Theron” (Illustration by C. Buisson)} \]
ances of anguiped giants in Italy. While she does not mention the vegiped goddess, she does demonstrate that giants appear in Italy long before the creation of the Altar of Zeus. Cristofani cites evidence of anguiped figures appearing in Etruria as early as the second half of the sixth century BC. Thus, the use of both the vegetal goddess and the anguiped giant in the Tomb of the Typhon can no longer be used as evidence for an Eastern origin of the iconography of the vegetal goddess. Both Cristofani and de Grummond have shown that giants have earlier precedents elsewhere, and Colonna has demonstrated that the Tomb of the Typhon does not date later than the third quarter of the third century BC. We must look somewhere other than Asia Minor for her origins, and, like the “Typhon”, the vegetal goddess appears earlier in Italy than in Asia Minor. An Italian origin for the iconography of this goddess is a possibility that must be considered.

Two early appearances of this goddess, or one of her variations, come from Italy. A silver plaque from Italy, possibly Southern Etruria, in the Bomford collection dated by Brown to the second half of the seventh century BC is perhaps the earliest (Fig. 2). In the center of the plaque, which may have been a buckle of some sort, is a “female bust surmounting a palmette” with two pairs of curling necks that end in lion and griffin heads springing from her waist. While this goddess is not strictly vegetal, she is quite similar to the goddess in the Tomb of the Typhon and also to two later pieces found in South Russia. On this plaque, she appears as a purely ornamental figure, and there are no contextual clues for understanding her meaning; one possibility is that she served an apotropaic function similar to that of the gorgon. Valentini’s study of the appearance of the potnia theron on bucchero vases also provides an early Etruscan example of the vegetal goddess. The handle of a kyathos from Chiusi, dating to the end of the seventh or beginning of the sixth century BC, is decorated with a goddess holding a pair of birds (Fig. 3). She wears a polos and the lower half of her body is replaced by an incised rosette and

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*figure 4 – Athrpa Mirror (After Bonfante 1983, fig. 25)*

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vegetal tendrils. An example of the *Rankenfrau* from the fourth century BC appears in the exergue of the Athrpa mirror (Fig. 4). The subject matter of the mirror concerns the ill-fated love of two mythological couples, Turan and Atune, and Atlenta and Meliacr. In both cases, the death of the male, which is alluded to by the boar’s head and Athrpa holding the nail of fate, occurred after a boar hunt. This mirror demonstrates a great deal of thematic unity, which is continued even into the exergue. The five figures present in the mirror appear to stand on top of this goddess as if she indicates a ground line and the earth. Here she functions as the setting of the myth and as a chthonic earth goddess, a reminder of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

These are only a few examples of this goddess from Etruria and South Italy. This figure was also commonly used as decoration in South Russia and Thracia, where many examples are contemporary to the fourth century Italian images of the goddess. Stoop assumes that she appears so frequently in South Russian art due to the popularity of a myth found in Herodotos 4.8-10 that attributes the origin of the Scythians to the union of an anguiped goddess and Herakles, and scholars have often associated the motif of the *Rankenfrau* with this anguiped goddess. This figure is not given a name by Herodotos, but she is surely an earth/mother goddess and does bear great similarity to the *Rankenfrau*. One example linked to Herodotos’ tale appears on a plaque from Kul Oba dated to the first half of the fourth century BC and is quite similar to the earlier Bomford Plaque (Fig.5). An analogous figure was also used to decorate a horse frontlet from Bolshaya Tsimbalka (Fig. 6). This frontlet depicts the goddess with plant and serpentine tendrils that end in horned-lion, griffin, and serpent’s heads.

A Thracian tomb near the village of Sveshtari presents yet another variation of this goddess that is stylistically close to the Scythian *Rankenfrau* (Fig. 7). In this tomb, dating to the first half of the third century BC, she has been multiplied into ten individualized fig-
Though they vary in age, each wears the same garment, a chiton “rendered decoratively as an upturned calyx made up of three acanthus leaves.” They, like the goddess in the Tomb of the Typhon, have been labeled caryatids because they are depicted with upraised arms that appear to support the ceiling of the tomb. Surely, they are meant to be viewed as the same sort of earth mother that is present in the Tomb of the Typhon, and they may be there for a similar reason, as a reminder of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Valeva also suggests that they may be present as mediators who would aid in the transition between life and death; this is a function that Etruscan demons are thought to perform in tombs and may be the function of the Rankenfrau of the Tomb of the Typhon.

Now that this goddess has been examined in several contexts, her identity may be proposed. When the Rankenfrau appears in Scythian and Thracian contexts, she is identified as...
as an earth mother or an incarnation of the Great Goddess. Our knowledge of Scythian mythology is scanty and our primary source is Herodotos, as mentioned earlier. However, there are other accounts of this Scythian deity; she appears in Valerius Flaccus, Diodorus 2.43, and the Tabula Albana. Herodotos and Valerius Flaccus do not name this goddess, but Diodorus refers to her as Hora and the Tabula Albana refer to her as Echidna. In all of these cases, we receive this myth through foreign intermediaries who syncretized the goddess with their own equivalents. While Herodotos does not give her a name, he does provide the Greek equivalents for several members of the Scythian pantheon. One goddess that he mentions who has been equated with the Rankenfrau by Artamanov, Rayevski, and Bessonova is Api or Ge-Api, an earth mother. In the Thracian context, we have no specific name for this goddess, due to a lack of written sources, but her function is discussed by Marazov as a goddess of death and rebirth and as a representative of the continuity of a ruling family or class and its ancestor cult.

Our knowledge of Etruscan myth also suffers from a lack of written sources, but we do have a fair amount of knowledge concerning the pantheon of Etruscan gods from various sources, particularly Etruscan mirrors and other visual arts. The Etruscan earth mother has been identified as Cel Ati by Colonna, based on a mirror bearing the inscription “Celscan” (Fig. 8) and several votive statuettes that bear the name of Cel. The name Cel also appears on the Piacenza liver in one of the infernal regions, which may help to confirm this identification.

The Rankenfrau in the Tomb of the Typhon may be a representation of Cel. This does not seem unlikely since Cel is associated with the afterlife, which may be supported by her appearance in this tomb. The figure on the opposite side of the column is a giant and may be one of her offspring. In the Tomb of the Typhon, she may serve as an intermediary between life and death, as Valeva has suggested for the goddesses in the Sveshtari tomb. Lastly, she acts as a support for the ceiling of the tomb, which is below ground and securely in her domain.
This goddess, who has been glossed over in discussions of the Tomb of the Typhon, is representative of a class of images that represent the primal earth mother. I would assert that she is no mere caryatid; she is Mother Earth, born of the first generation of gods and mother to a host of goddesses that imitate and reduplicate her in successive generations. Her function and meaning should not be underestimated or overshadowed by her offspring after whom the Tomb of the Typhon was named. She should also not be overlooked because she often appears in an “ornamental” context; instead we should see her commonality and popularity in art as references to her continuous presence in the world around us.

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NOTES

1. Steingräber (2000, 241) suggests that the tomb was in use from the “second quarter or middle of the second until the first century BC, and was reused in the Roman Imperial period.” However, Colonna (1984, 23) has convincingly argued that the tombs in Tarquinia were no longer painted after the end of the third or beginning of the second century BC and he dates the Typhons to the third quarter of the third century BC.
4. Pallottino 1952, 128; see also Steingraber 1986, 347.
5. Stoop 1960, 49.
6. Another motif that is similar to the Rankenfrau and popular on Apulian vases is the image of a female head rising from the calyx of a lotus blossom. Stoop (1960, 66) classifies this particular image as a “western” variant of this goddess’ iconography, and Castriota (1995, 66-7, 76) notes the possibility of identifying this figure as the goddess “Aura,” the fertilizing breeze. Valeva (1995, 340) and Schauenburg (1957, 218) have suggested that this image had no bearing on the development of the Rankenfrau. This latter view seems simplistic since both of these images are of a hybrid female, part human and part plant, and they must possess similar meanings. The two types of vegetal goddess also appear in the same context as subsidiary elements of decoration.
7. Stoop 1960, 52.
15. Ustinova (1999, 95) equates the vegetal goddess and the anguiped goddess in all of her variations.
17. Von Vacano 1960, 10-3.
28. Ustinova (1999, 91-92) does not support this identification and instead proposes that she was the daughter of Ge-Api by a river god, due to her lack of universality and her participation in “quasi-romantic myths.” However, the appearance of this figure in a “quasi-romantic” context does not preclude universality, and in Hesiod’s Theogony Ge does participate in such myths.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


