Niobe (?) on the Portonaccio Temple at Veii

Jenifer Neils

Case Western Reserve University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/etruscan_studies

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/etruscan_studies/vol11/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Etruscan Studies by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
Niobe (?) on the Portonaccio Temple at Veii

by Jenifer Neils

ABSTRACT

The most famous examples of Etruscan architectural sculptures are those from the Portonaccio sanctuary at Veii of ca. 510 B.C. The surviving over-life-size terracotta akroteria include Apollo (to whom the temple was originally thought to be dedicated), Herakles, Hermes, and a female figure holding a child identified as Leto with her son Apollo. Given the rarity of Apollo as a child in classical art and the implausibility of his appearing twice on a building dedicated to Minerva, a new interpretation is here proposed for this group as Niobe with her youngest child. If the Veii Apollo, striding along with his bow, is correctly interpreted as reacting to Herakles’ clubbing of the Kerynian hind, then one can visualize his sister in a similar pose chasing Niobe and her last surviving child, as depicted on a slightly later Attic red-figure vase. This subject in which Niobe is punished for her impiety is more in keeping with other themes of Etruscan architectural sculpture, such as the Pyrgi pedimental group, which are deliberately normative.

Reproduced in every handbook of Etruscan art, the Portonaccio temple of Veii with its rooftop terracotta sculptures is one of the best known architectural monuments of ancient Etruria. All students of art history recognize the group of the striding god Apollo/Aplu, the deity to whom the temple was originally believed to be dedicated, battling the Greek hero Herakles/Hercle over the Kerynian hind. Otto Brendel called it “one of the most distinguished examples preserved of all Etruscan sculpture.” Equally often illustrated is the head of the god Hermes/Turms, who is posed as a bystander behind the figure of Herakles in most reconstructions of the roof. For purposes of symmetry a putative Artemis/Artume is often reconstructed behind her brother Apollo. However, there were more life-size terracotta figures, as well as akroteria
figure 1 and figure 2 – Woman fleeing with child, front and back. Terracotta akroterion from Portonaccio Temple at Veii, ca. 510 B.C. Rome, Villa Giulia. Photos: Hirmer
pedestals, found in the excavations at the Portonaccio sanctuary, and few attempts have been made to arrange these on the temple building. A case in point is the subject of this paper, the life-size sculpture of a draped woman carrying a child at her left shoulder (Figs. 1-2). I here question the traditional identification of this figure and posit an alternative that has greater affinity with the sculptural programs of other Etruscan temples.

The body of the female figure and her child were discovered in some 250 pieces by Massimo Pallottino in 1938 – twenty-two years after the Apollo, Herakles, and head of Hermes. The fragments lay just to the north of the sanctuary’s later altar. The head was not found until 1944 and while it does not actually join the body, its relevance to the statue seems assured on the basis of fabric and coloring. In its restored state the statue measures 1.66 m, or just slightly shorter than the statue of Apollo (1.75 m). Like Apollo she is posed in an extremely wide stride, but is moving to her left or the viewer’s right. She is richly clad in a light-colored belted chiton contrasting with a dark symmetrical mantle. Her hair is long and flowing, and her head is crowned with a diadem. While her left arm is missing, with her right she braces the leg of a young child, preserved from the waist down, who is perched at her left shoulder. The child is presumably male on account of his darker skin color; he wears a short tunic, the folds of which are visible along his left thigh.

In his publication of the statue in 1950 Pallottino identified the kourotrophic female as the goddess Leto/Latona holding the infant Apollo/Aplu in her arms, and this identification has been generally accepted in much of the scholarly literature. Assuming another two-figured narrative group like the Herakles and Apollo, he interpreted this second group as baby Apollo shooting the snake Python at Delphi. In his reconstruction (Fig. 3) he has somewhat altered the direction of Leto’s gaze, shifting it farther to the right. His chief comparator for this mythical scene was the name-vase of the Leto Painter, a red-figure lekythos in Berlin of ca. 470 B.C. that shows Leto carrying the nude, baby archer Apollo aiming his bow to the right. As evidence for the Python Pallottino cited a black-figure lekythos of similar date in Paris that shows the serpent coiling near an altar and cave, with another woman and palm tree intervening.
between the snake and Leto (Fig. 4). To support his interpretation Pallottino proposed that a very small terracotta fragment of a possible snake could be the Python. A mere six centimeters in diameter, this fragment is problematic as part of a life-size akroterion intended to be visible from far below.

Besides the diminutive snake, there are numerous problems with these Attic vase-painting comparanda. First, Leto is shown standing still, not moving as in the Veii statue. Second, Apollo is nude, and finally, both figures look to the right. Closer to the Veii sculpture in pose is the Leto on a lost Apulian amphora once in the Hamilton collection (Fig. 5). Here she is actually running and looking back at the snake curled in its cave, but she holds two half-draped children, neither of whom is shooting a bow. More importantly both black-figure lekythoi were found in Attica, and in the Etruscan sphere the episode is represented quite differently. A charming fifth-century mirror from Cerveteri shows the divine twins as toddlers together battling the large snake while their mother looks calmly on (Fig. 6). In this instance the nude children are on the ground and perhaps not surprisingly in Etruscan art, Artemis is leading the charge. In none of these illustrations of the Python myth does the child Apollo appear endangered; he is after all a god and does not need his mother’s protection.

At the time Pallottino published his interpretation, it was generally accepted that the Portonaccio temple was dedicated to Apollo in spite of the fact that at least three inscribed sixth-century bucchero sherds bear the name of Menrva/Minerva. More recently scholars like Banti have suggested a triad of divinities, namely Menrva, Artume and Turan, while Torelli claims a joint oracular cult of Delphic Apollo and Menrva. However, the inscriptive evidence, as well as the ambiguity regarding the number of cellas (one with two alae, or three), clearly demonstrate that Menrva was the original cult figure at the Portonaccio sanctuary. Therefore, one might legitimately question the existence of two images of Apollo on a temple dedicated to another deity. And in fact Otto Brendel did so in 1978: “For the striding woman who tenderly bears a child in her arms no satisfactory explanation has yet been forthcoming.
Since the infant cannot be the god Apollo, the suggestion to name its guardian Latona, Apollo’s mother, carries little conviction.” Nonetheless Pallottino’s appellation has stuck, and most publications still label the figure Latona/Leto. Brendel went on to suggest that the woman may simply be an un-named kourotrophic figure, not unlike some of the later votives found in the sanctuary. A drawback to this identification is the fact that the other figures on the roof are taking part in narratives, whereas a kourotrophos, like the Mater Matuta from Chianciano, is usually a single image with no associated action.

Other suggestions for the identity of this mother and child have not been lacking. One posited by Silvio Ferri is Creusa with her son Ascanius (or if a deity is preferred, Aphrodite with her grandson) escaping Troy, a popular theme in Italy. In classical art there are numerous images of women holding a child thus, and almost always it is mortal and in peril for its life. Examples from Athenian vase painting include Danae with baby Perseus as they are about to be set adrift in a box; a nurse holding Alkmaion, the son of Amphiaras, as the latter departs for war and his demise at Thebes; Andromache clutching Astyanax who will eventually be slain by the divine twins. In sculpture one thinks of the Lapith women fleeing from the rapacious centaurs, babes in arm, on the frieze of the temple of Apollo Epikourios at Bassai. The vulnerability of the child is signified by being carried in a woman’s protective arms, and its fate is more often than not a negative one. Children in such cases are clearly harbingers of harm, and serve as attributes (rather than protagonists) to accentuate the tragic fate of their mothers or families.

In the Etruscan sphere a woman with a child in arms is even rarer, but some examples
exist in terracotta architectural sculpture. In some cases, as on the famous central akroterion from Cerveteri, the woman is winged and so is identified as Thesan/Eos abducting Kephalos or Tithonos; in this instance the child's nakedness perhaps alludes to the erotic nature of the encounter. It has been suggested that an akroterion fragment of a standing draped woman holding a child from the archaic temple at Sant’ Omobono represents Ino/Leukothea and Palaimon about to jump into the sea. While these images further demonstrate the Etruscans’ interest in the kourotrophic role of women, the Veii statue’s lack of wings and her striding pose eliminate Eos and Ino as possible candidates.

Before suggesting an alternative interpretation, there are several aspects of this unique statue that need emphasis. First is the pose of the so-called Leto: the figure is clearly fleeing to the right and she is holding the child protectively with her right hand. One has to posit a position for her left hand, and it too should be holding the boy, presumably attached somewhere to his missing upper body. Only with considerable difficulty does this pose conform to an image of an infant god aiming his bow and arrow at a snake to the figure’s proper left, as in Pallottino’s reconstruction (Fig. 3). Also, as noted above, the woman is looking out as if being pursued, not ahead toward the putative snake as one might expect if there was indeed a snake present. Second is the fact that the other well-preserved akroteria of the Veii Temple form a narrative mythological group consisting of two more-or-less equal antagonists, Apollo versus Herakles. This being the case, it is compositionally more appropriate to posit a full-sized opponent chasing this mother-cum-child figure.

Since the sculptor has chosen to represent Apollo in contest with another male (even though in myth the hind belongs to his sister), he might well have paired this second struggle with one between two females. And in fact there exists from the Veii excavations an akroterion statue base with female feet which a number of scholars in the past labeled Artemis because she seemed a likely companion to Apollo.

Images of the goddess Artemis pursuing a woman who clutches a child in her arms are not common. However, an Attic red-figure amphora of ca. 470-460 B.C. found at Vulci and now in a private collection in Paris shows just such a scene. The vase is not well known since it is usually only reproduced in a line drawing made in the early nineteenth century (Fig. 7). While Cook and others have suggested that the scene represents Artemis chasing...
Kallisto who is holding baby Arkas, Beazley’s identification as Artemis pursuing Niobe with her youngest child is more likely – especially as the amphora is attributed to the painter whose most famous vase presents a complete version of this myth, namely the Niobid Painter. On his calyx-krater from Orvieto now in the Louvre Apollo and Artemis together dispatch the Niobids, but their mother is not present. It is striking how closely the figure of Artemis on the Niobid Painter’s amphora resembles the Veii Apollo who is usually restored with a bow in his extended left hand, and how neatly the kourotrophic statue parallels the image of Niobe, although on the vase she is holding a female child. This vase painting was actually mentioned by Pallottino in his publication of the female akrote- rion from Veii, but he nonetheless opted for the identification of the statue as Leto.

The slaying of the children of Niobe, although mentioned as early as the Iliad (24.602-609), is rare in early Greek and Etruscan art, and does not seem to be common until the Hellenistic period. However, the earliest representations of this scene appear on two Tyrrhenian amphorae of ca. 560 B.C. attributed to the Castellani Painter, the best preserved now in Hamburg (Fig. 8), and so the myth was certainly known to the Etruscans in the sixth century. Tyrrhenian amphorae have been found almost exclusively in Etruria and were presumably a special export item for the Etruscans who must have had a preference for this theme as it does not exist in any other extant Greek art of the sixth century.

The argument in favor of identifying the Veii mother-and-child as Niobe is not just an aesthetic and compositional one (even if the figures on the vase bear such a strik-
ing resemblance to Etruscan akroteria; Fig. 9). Ideologically this interpretation also better serves the meanings and messages that the Etruscans wished to encode in the decoration of their temples and the mechanism by which these were to be transmitted to worshippers. Scholars have noted a preference for themes exemplifying the consequences of impiety and the punishments meted out to those mortals who defied the gods. For instance, the ridge-pole statues atop the late archaic Temple of Mater Matuta at Satricum, as recently restored by Lulof, form pairs of deities slaying the hubristic giants who challenged the Olympians. Although this sanctuary is located in Latium, its sculpture program is certainly influenced by Etruscan models. Even closer in tone is the pedimental relief plaque of Temple A at Pyrgi of ca. 460 B.C., where the viewer encounters two supreme gods, Zeus and Athena, meting out punishments to the heroes outside the walls of Thebes. Zeus hurling his thunderbolt against the rebellious Kapanes, and Athena keeping the elixir of immortality from the hero Tydeus who is eating the brains of his foe Melanippos (Fig. 10). These pairs of heroes commit hubris against the gods, just as Herakles and Niobe do in their own encounters with Apollo and Artemis. And in fact Kapanes’ boast that even Zeus could not prevent him from scaling the walls of Thebes finds an echo in Niobe’s claim to have produced many more children than the divine Leto. It might also be noted that the slaying of the Niobids traditionally takes place in Thebes, as Niobe is the wife of its king Amphion. Given the Etruscans’ preoccupation with Theban sagas, as well as their interest in Apollo and Artemis as divinities of death and vengeance, it should not be surprising to find the myth of Niobe represented in a prominent place on an Etruscan temple.

In both cases these narratives are set in the most conspicuous location in the sanctuary, at the apex of the temple, in order to be visible to all visitors. Silhouetted against the sky, the Veii akroterial figures, more than the Pyrgi pedimental plaque, call attention to themselves and their actions in carefully paired ‘freeze-frames’. The figures of Herakles and Niobe are depicted receiving their due from the twin gods of vengeance, Apollo and Artemis, and so these carefully chosen narratives could serve as warnings to mortals of the might and power of the gods – an apt message in any religious setting. The choice of subject matter is deliberately normative and is calculated both to act as a caution to mortals and to enhance the prestige of the gods. Niobe, about to lose her last
child, serves this purpose much more powerfully than an image of the baby Apollo killing a snake. 31

Another important aspect of these two mythical representations is the extent to which they have been transformed from their Greek prototypes or models, if indeed they are even modeled on Greek art as opposed to a text. According to literary accounts of the third labor of Herakles, the hero actually succeeded in capturing the deer sacred to Artemis, so is the Veii group an altered representation of that labor or an entirely different episode? On a mid-sixth century Attic plate attributed to Lydos Herakles and Apollo actually fight over a deer, as they often do over the tripod, and it has been suggested that this adventure may be distinct from the labor involving the Kerynian hind. 32 If so, it is possible that Apollo will be the victor and Herakles chastised for his misdeed, a version that the Etruscans may have found more fitting for a temple. As noted above in regard to the Niodid Painter’s amphora, Niobe is holding a female child while the Portonaccio statue is holding a male one. Why this alteration in the standard iconography which follows later literary accounts of Artemis shooting down the female children and Apollo the male? 33 In Greek and Etruscan depictions of children, the child is almost universally male, and this is also the case in kourotrophic figures which are common to both cultures. Perhaps the Etruscan artist is attempting to make the scene even more poignant since the loss of one’s youngest son represents the end of a lineage, as so often in Greek imagery of the death of young Astyanax at the fall of Troy. Thus, it appears that both the choices of these unusual divine duels as well as their representations or transformations at the
hands of the Etruscan sculptor were calculated to reinforce their message to the viewer.34

One may well ask how this reading of the Portonaccio akroteria relates to the deity worshipped in the sanctuary and for whom its normative message was intended. To answer these questions one needs to consider the guise under which Menrva was worshipped as evidenced by the votive offerings and the nature and location of the sanctuary. Although the votive offerings from the Portonaccio sanctuary are not fully published, there appear to have been many terracotta figurines of the kourotrophos type, i.e. a female, usually seated, holding or nursing a child, usually male.35 Such figures are normally dedicated to protective female goddesses, and naturally indicate an interest in fertility and children on the part of the dedicators. Presumably women seeking protection for their children would see in the Niobe story a warning of the dire consequences for an overly proud, impious mother and act accordingly.36 In terms of location the Portonaccio temple is situated in an extra-mural sanctuary just outside the walls of Veii with a major road bounding its northern extremity. A basin, parallel to the north side of the temple and almost as long as the temple itself, indicates that rituals of purification and atonement took place here, probably on the part of travelers or traders about to enter the city.37 Again could one imagine the vengeance of Apollo for the theft of his sister’s deer by Herakles as a loaded message to tradesmen to deal fairly? As visitors purified themselves and made offerings to Menrva before entering the city, they were also subtly informed of the power and vengeance of the gods.38 In this way Menrva serves her primary function as a protectress of the city.

In the liminal space of the extra-mural sanctuary it was perhaps especially appropriate to depict mythological figures who made a transition from one state to another. While Herakles ultimately achieved immortality with the aid of Athena,39 Niobe, on account of her grief, is eventually turned to stone. However at Veii they are shown, not as necessarily exemplars of virtue, but in the midst of their confrontations with the gods of vengeance, Apollo and Artemis, whom one transgresses at one’s peril.40 This message comes through loud and clear from the rooftop of the Portonaccio temple.

*Jenifer Neils*
Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, Ohio
jxn4@case.edu
NOTES

Versions of this paper were read at the annual meetings of the Archaeological Institute of America on January 3, 2004, and the College Art Association on February 23, 2006. I thank Helen Nagy and Alexandra Carpino who chaired these sessions devoted to Etruscan art as well as the audiences. Shirley Swartz was helpful in providing bibliography, and the anonymous reviewers for Etruscan Studies supplied many cogent suggestions.

1. All of the sculptures from the Portonaccio sanctuary at Veii are in the Villa Giulia in Rome with the following inventory numbers: Apollo 40702; Herakles 40704; Hermes 40772. For excellent photographs of these sculptures as well as the foundations of the temple, see Sprenger and Bartolini 1977, pls. 116-23.


3. For possible roof reconstructions see A. de Agostino, Veio (Rome 1971) pls. 6-7.

4. Pallottino 1939, 17-23. For the earlier finds see G. Giglioli, NSc 1919, 13-37.

5. In the sections marked W1 and HW on the plan in Colonna 2001.


7. Berlin, Antikenmuseum F 2212; ARV² 730, 8; LIMC 1, no. 988 s.v Apollon.

8. Paris, Cabinet des Médailles 306; ABV 572, 7; CVA 2 pl. 86.2.6-8. A related example is in Bergen, Museum of Applied Art VK 62.115; Paralipomena 294; CVA Norway 1, pl. 33.3-5.

9. I was unable to see this fragment in the Villa Giulia storerooms and so cannot comment on its possible relationship to the other Veii sculptures.

10. Lost Apulian vase of the first half of the fourth century B.C., known from a drawing by W. Tischbein, Collection of Engravings III (1795) 4; LIMC 1, 302 no. 995 s.v. Apollon. Cf. also a 4th-3rd century B.C. marble relief dedicated by Agathon (inscribed), recently acquired by the Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory University (2003.23.6). For sculptures of the fleeing Leto with her children see Ridgway 1981-83, 99-109, figs. 1-8, who interprets the scene as Leto’s unhappy encounter with the shepherds of Lycia. For Euphranor’s statue of Leto carrying her infants seen by Pliny in the Temple of Concord in Rome, see Palagia 1980, 36-39.

11. Rome, Villa Giulia 51109; Gerhard ES 4, 1 pl. 291 A; LIMC 1, 359, no. 11 s.v. Apollon/Aplu.


13. Female triad: Banti 1943, 187-224; Rebuffat-Emanuel 1962, 469-84; Rebuffat-Emanuel 1981, 269-79. Oracular cult: Torelli 1981, 169. According to Pfiffig (1975, 251-55) there are no known Etruscan temples dedicated to Apollo. More recently it has been suggested that Athena might have been worshipped only in the eastern part of the sanctuary while the temple in the west would have been dedicated to Apollo; see Colonna 2001, 38-40 and F. Boitani, Kermes 17 (2004) 42.

14. Brendel 1978, 240. For kourotrrophic votives in Etruria, mostly of the 4th to 2nd cen-
turies B.C., see Bonfante 1986.
15. For kourotrrophic images in Etruscan art see Bonfante 1997, 176-96.
17. Ferri 1954, 118 makes this point in regard to the Veii statue: “Si direbbe che la dea fugge per mettere in salvo suo figlio.”
18. Some of these images are collected in the article by Neumann 1964, 141-44, pls. 75-79.
19. Berlin, Antikensammlung inv. TC 6681.1; see Kästner 1988, 170, fig. 128.
21. Bartoloni (Sprenger and Batoloni 1997, 112) writes: “the acroterial statues of the temple do not fit into one mythological episode. It has been proposed that they were grouped by twos, in subject matter and possibly also tectonically, so that related pairs would combine into a scenic unity of form and content. The goddess with child in her arms would have been half of such a unit.” Given this reasoning a snake does not make a comparable counterpart to Herakles in the other extant narrative group.
22. Paris, Baron Ernst Seillière collection; ARV² 604, 51; LIMC 2 s.v. Artemis no. 1347.
23. The Kallisto-Arkas identification was first suggested by Imhoof-Blumer on the basis of 4th-century coins from Orchomenos (where the child is on the ground) according to Cook 1964, 13-14. See also Schefold 1981, 230 fig. 316.
26. Later Etruscan versions of the slaying of the Niobids include the 2nd-century terracotta pedimental group from Luni, now in Florence (see L. Banti, Luni [1937] 49-51, pls. 19-22), and the late 4th to early 3rd -century nenfro sarcophagus of the Vipinana family of Tuscania, now in the Vatican, Mus. Greg. Etr. 14947 (see LIMC 1, 340 no. 23 s.v. Apollon/Aplu).
27. Hamburg, Museum fur Kunst und Gewerbe 1960.1; Paralipomena 35, 40; Clairmont AntK 6 (1963) 25 pl. 9, 1-2. Leipzig, Universität T 4225; Paralipomena 35, 40; CVA Leipzig 2, pl. 9, 1.
30. In addition to the Seven Against Thebes (for which see Kaukopf 1974) another Theban myth of revenge favored by the Etruscans is that of Aktaion/Ataiun (see Lacy 1994, 165-79). The scene of Apollo and Artemis punishing Tityos for his attempted rape of their mother Leto is popular among the so-called “Pontic” vase painters; see Hampe and Simon 1964, 29-32.
32. This suggestion is made by Carpenter 1991, 44 in relation to the Lydan plate in Oxford (Ashmolean 1934.333; ABV 115, 4), fig. 74. This same episode is represented on an Etruscan bronze helmet attachment from Vulci in the Bibliothèque National in Paris; see LIMC 1, s.v. Apollon/Aplu no. 13.
33. This gender division is not always followed as evidenced by an Attic red-figure cup (London E 81) attributed to the Phiale Painter where Apollo is aiming his arrow at a girl. See Oakley 1990, pl. 129.

34. For transformations of Greek myths on Etruscan mirrors, see Carpino 1996, 65-85.

35. These are discussed in Moretti Sgubini 2001, 50. See also Colonna 2001, 198, pls. 34-35, 37. For a general discussion of this type of figure in Etruria see L. Bonfante 1986, 195-203.

36. The large number of rocchetti, spindle whorls and loom weights also indicates worship on the part of women. See Colonna 2001, 247 (summary by L. M. Michetti).


38. For a thorough description of the sanctuary see Edlund 1987, 64-67.

39. At the Portonaccio sanctuary terracotta statues of Athena and Herakles appear as a possible votive offering; see Colonna 1987b, 7-41. The popularity of Herakles and Minerva in Etruscan terracottas is the subject of Lulof 2000, 207-19.

40. For sanctuaries as liminal spaces see Glinister 2003. On Apollo and Artemis as gods of vengeance, see Carpenter 1994.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Banti, L. 1943. “Il culto del cosidetto tempio dell’Apollo a Portonaccio e il problema delle triadi etrusco-italiche.” StEtr 17: 187-224


