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# The Etruscan Collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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BY INGRID EDLUND-BERRY

Much of the study of archaeology focuses on establishing a real or perceived ‘context’ of objects. For the papers presented in this colloquium, the museum context is the one predictable factor, and one which allows us to trace the origin of the objects within the history of collecting. In terms of identifying an archaeological context, however, these same objects present some interesting perspectives and unexpected wrinkles.

Since so much of Etruscan material culture is derived from tombs, the most common context is that of the tomb group, that is the contents of any given tomb, including objects such as ash urns, pottery, jewelry, and toilet articles, or weapons. And, as can therefore be expected, when groups of such objects are displayed in museums or other exhibits, the viewer is encouraged to interpret the life history of the individual buried in such a context.

Although Richard De Puma’s paper on the tomb of Fastia Velsi from Chiusi ostensibly discusses such a tomb group, he immediately makes it clear that the objects in Boston represent an artificial man-made construct, based on a selection of several burials, presumably from the same tomb chamber. While there would be no set number or types of objects for any given tomb group, with allowances made for wealth, gender, location, and time period, De Puma points out that the urn is only one of a set which still remains at Chiusi, as the property of the Lucioli family. Likewise, there is an abundance of mirrors, instead of the more likely number of one for each burial, and two sets of dice and not one. Thus, the circumstances of this artificially created tomb group suggest that perhaps the antiquities dealer, Raoul Tolentino, from whom the museum purchased the objects in 1913, had some say in what would be pleasing to a museum audience rather than adhering to the archaeological principle of preserving the original find context.

Ili Nagy presents a different kind of context in her paper on votive terracottas. Here it is not a question of viewing an artificial reconstruction of a votive deposit and its

contents, but rather the sad realization that votive material in general has suffered greatly in terms of both excavating and collecting practices. Because of the abundance of mass-produced objects, be it lamps, figurines, or pottery, the objects found in votive deposits were often discarded, dispersed, and, even if preserved, neglected and often relegated to museum storage rooms.

The votive objects discussed by Nagy fall in the category of a large votive deposit from Cerveteri, now dispersed across three continents. Seen in conjunction with the large collection at Berkeley, the Boston group gives a mere glimpse of the variety of the original deposit, but as Nagy has shown, the selection is not arbitrary. Rather, the group of twelve objects was selected by Rodolfo Lanciani as a representative sample of the deposit as a whole. The ‘context’ thus created is not unique to the Boston group, but falls in the category of the many study collections of antiquities formed throughout the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As a group then, these terracottas form a context of sorts, but one that is very incomplete and created by modern criteria of collecting rather than ancient criteria of what votives represented as gifts to the gods.

In the case of Ingrid Rowland’s and Greg Warden’s papers, the archaeological context is limited to the fact that the two sarcophagi come from a tomb at Vulci and the dinos presumably also from a tomb, but at Cerveteri. Instead, it is the objects themselves that provide an iconographic context of what they represent and how they reflect on Etruscan society.

The immediate context of the two sarcophagi discussed by Ingrid Rowland is that they belong together and represent two generations of the same family. This statement may sound like a truism, but strangely enough it is rare to find the sarcophagi illustrated together and compared with each other. Although the theme is identical, a married couple embracing each other, the material and execution differ. What both illustrate, however, is the Etruscan emphasis on depicting men and women, whether at banquets, or as here, embracing. It is perhaps ironic that the sarcophagus for the younger couple displays Greek features, in spite of the fact that Greek texts express their dismay over the openness with which Etruscan women were seen with men, including their husbands.

The Campana dinos from Cerveteri also includes interaction between men and women, but in a very different type of scene. The men are dancing, playing the flute, or carrying objects such as vessels and a basket, whereas a man and a woman are taking turns operating a large mortar with long pestles. As Warden points out, Etruscan displays of already-prepared food are plentiful, but less attention is paid to how the food was acquired, other than in scenes of hunting or of carrying already-killed animals. What separates the Boston dinos from other depictions of the handling of food items is that unlike the Ricci hydria or the Golini tomb frescoes there is no evidence of the cutting-up of meat or the preparation of an animal sacrifice. Because of the presence of the dancers and flute-players attending the ceremony surrounding the mortar and pestle it would seem equally likely that we are witnessing the preparation of a meat-less sacrifice or sacrificial meal, and that the ingredients used were subjected to as much public scrutiny as sacrificial animals. If this is the case, the preparers, both the men and the woman, have an important role to fill, and may more likely have the roles of priests or priestly attendants

than those of servants working behind the scenes.

As can be expected, the objects discussed in these four papers have opened the doors to a variety of questions. And, thanks to the careful investigations of scholars who have examined not only the objects in the Museum of Fine Arts but also the often long and complicated history of their discovery and ownership, we are closer to understanding the depth of the Etruscan expressions of life and death.

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