

An up-date on the origins and development of tomb-painting in Etruria (Central Italy)

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In the first millennium BC along the west coast of Central Italy in the Mediterranean Sea were situated the rich and powerful cities of the Etruscan people, whose culture originally mixed oriental roots with Italic traditions. In Antiquity the origins of the Etruscans were quite unclear, especially because Greek and Roman historians could not read the mysterious Etruscan texts, which are written in a language that is now classified as a non-Indo-European language.

The Etruscans derived their prosperity from the fertile valleys, where corn and wine were produced, and from the iron and copper mines in the northern part of the region: But in Antiquity they were most famous as sailors, both as pirates and as traders. The Etruscans believed in a life after death. Therefore they developed a particular cult for the dead, who from the 7th century BC were buried in chamber-tombs cut out of tuff, the soft volcanic rock typical of the landscape in central Italy. The tombs reproduced the interior of the houses. So, roofs with ceiling-beams, walls with doors and windows and beds with legs and cushions were cut out in the rock.

The tombs of the 7th century BC, the so-called orientализing period, were embellished with paintings, painted directly on the walls without a plaster base coating. Therefore they have now almost completely vanished. Thanks to water colour reproductions executed in the last century, at least the subjects are known. The themes were always related to death. For example, wild animals such as lions or panthers, that did not live in Europe, were painted realistically as keepers of the afterlife. Later in the 6th and 5th centuries BC, the technique and the subjects of the paintings changed. On the tuff walls paintings were executed on a layer of plaster with scenes derived from daily life. Men and women at a banquet, or fishermen in a boat on the sea indicate that life and death were strictly connected and that the living did not fear death. After the 5th century BC, when the Etruscans began to fight against the increasing power of Rome and to lose their prosperity, the idea of the afterlife also changed profoundly. Now on the walls of the chamber-tombs there are not scenes of daily life, but horrible demons leading the dead with big hammers.