Summary. The first painted tombs in Etruria date to about 675–650 BC, as attested by a few examples at Veii and Caere, which pre-date those of Tarquinia (mainly sixth–third centuries BC). At first glance, tomb painting has no obvious connection with the Early Iron Age or Villanovan period (tenth/ninth–eighth centuries BC), when burial in shaft or trench graves predominated. Nevertheless, some links can be suggested with Villanovan house urns, which reinforce the point that indigenous traditions merit greater consideration than is usual in discussions of Etruscan artistic and cultural development.

INTRODUCTION

Etruria’s debt to Greece is a pervasive theme in Etruscan scholarship, especially in discussions about art. It first emerged in the eighteenth century when the riches of Etruscan cemeteries, including painted frescoes, began to illuminate an as yet little known civilisation. Piranesi and his successors in the early nineteenth century argued about the Etruscan, as opposed to the Greek, ancestry of Roman architecture and about the source of painted vases found in tombs. In the twentieth century, discussions of Etruscan art often dwelt on questions about its origins and originality, Greek or Near Eastern sources of inspiration, links with the art of adjacent native peoples (or Italic art) and with Roman art (e.g. Cristofani 1978, 18–25; Pallottino 1985, 46–53; Harari 1992, with further references).

Sometimes regarded as a rather derivative phenomenon, Etruscan art broadly followed trends in Greek art between the eighth and third centuries BC, at least in terms of stylistic development. The specifically Etruscan dimension is generally sought in the persistence of local traditions, or in the expression of ideas and themes that had counterparts or may have originated elsewhere, but were adopted and adapted locally in a selective and distinctive manner. Some links between Etruscan and Early Iron Age art, or what is sometimes called symbolic visual imagery, have been acknowledged. For instance, the origins of Archaic cremation ‘canopic’ urns of Chiusi are easily traced back to Villanovan jar urns with anthropomorphic connotations imparted by such devices as helmet covering-lids. Similarly, one can readily chart the development of Etruscan metalworking from the abundance and sophistication of Early Iron Age production onwards, and the persistence of Villanovan ceramic traditions well into the seventh century BC (e.g. Camporeale 2000). In fact, there is
growing evidence that even the elite continued to live for much of the seventh century in traditional ‘long-houses’, which were not markedly different from those of their Villanovan predecessors (Waarsenburg 2001).

However, the Early Iron Age is accorded less than four per cent of the text in several influential works on Etruscan art (Brendel 1995; Cristofani 1978; Torelli 1985), even though it represents at least a quarter of the time span (tenth–second centuries BC) usually treated in general syntheses of Etruscan history and archaeology. One would infer, therefore, that its relevance is slight. This perception is encouraged by the notion of a profound cultural and artistic disjunction in Italy due to Greek and Phoenician colonisation, and by the prominence of the more familiar arts and crafts of fully fledged Etruscan city-states. In fact, the equivalent of a Big Bang Theory has remained influential in the study of Etruscan art, which has been described as evolving ‘... from virtually nothing in the Greek Orientalizing period’ (Boardman 1967, 155). This statement may seem more contentious today than at the time when it was written, and yet there have been few serious attempts in recent years to challenge several undeveloped or potentially biased ideas in the literature, which are ripe for revision including, for example, Brendel’s comments on the ‘psychology of Italian Geometric design’ (Brendel 1995, 35). Italy noticeably lacks any major synthesis comparable with that of Whitley (1991) for contemporary Greece.

Undoubtedly, the various traditions of prehistoric and classical archaeology have also emphasised contrasting perspectives and priorities. If classicists, followed by a wider public, have gravitated to the more familiar or Hellenic aspects of Etruscan art, prehistoric archaeologists have tended to neglect Iron Age visual imagery in favour of more traditional concerns with dating, socio-economic reconstruction and landscape archaeology. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that the late prehistoric Villanovan period (protostoria in Italian terminology) is an appropriate starting point for the study of Etruscan civilisation. This also accords with the currently prevalent autochthonous model of Etruscan origins, in contrast to the theory of a migration from Lydia (Herodotus 1.94). In recent years, attention has focused on issues which require a longer time perspective, such as state formation and urbanism, prompting contributions from varied standpoints (for example, Harris 1989; Wilkins 1991; Bietti Sestieri 1997; Pacciarelli 2000, with bibliographies). At the same time, visual symbols from later prehistory have periodically been incorporated, albeit sometimes rather controversially, into theories about cultural origins or about the mythic, religious and artistic traditions of later societies (for example, Torelli 1997; Carandini 2002; and Bietti Sestieri 2000 for a recent critique).

As far as the origin of Etruscan tomb painting is concerned, detailed studies by Naso (1990, 1996) have highlighted fairly widespread analogies and potential sources of inspiration in the arts and crafts of the eastern Mediterranean (notably Phoenicio-Cypriot and Cretan) during the Orientalizing period, but also noted some connections with Early Iron Age house urns (or hut urns). In this article, I explore a wider range of possible links with house urns and contingent issues in order to promote an indigenous perspective on early Etruscan art.

1 An earlier start to the Iron Age (in at least the tenth century BC) has been proposed by several individuals in recent years (e.g. Bietti Sestieri 1997, 375).

2 I prefer to call them house urns, rather than adhere to a widespread convention (e.g. Brandt and Karlsson 2001) which labels Villanovan dwellings as huts, and those of the Etruscan or later periods as houses.
URN AND HOUSE DECORATION

First, however, some potentially prejudicial viewpoints in the existing literature should be mentioned, including the following:

‘For the Iron Age... one cannot speak of a monumental art, either with regard to architecture, which probably remained within the limited repetition or elaboration of primitive house-hut types... or with regard to plastic arts and painting. The taste for decorative or figurative representation of peoples at this level is manifested almost exclusively by the forms and decoration of small objects...’ (Pallottino 1985, 59, my translation).³

While small objects are an important source of evidence, this statement risks undervaluing timber architecture and implying that there were no larger-scale forms of expression in the Early Iron Age. In addition, it tends to be assumed that life-size sculpture of the human form first appeared in Etruria in the seventh century BC (e.g. Torelli 1985, 57). Admittedly, we lack large works in stone, wood or clay prior to this time, but this should not rule out their existence.

Here of course is a familiar conundrum: does absence of evidence signify a real absence? One can at least argue the point. If we take Italic house urns, characteristic of Etruria and Latium, as models of real buildings, then we can make some claims for a kind of ‘monumental art’. In fact, some Early Iron Age houses are no less impressive in size than their Etruscan successors. Moreover, their roof timbers were evidently carved with animal- or bird-headed terminations. Especially noteworthy are house urns with comparatively large modelled human figures set on the roof (Fig. 1a; Bartoloni et al. 1987, nos. 180–2). These provide a credible basis for inferring the existence of large-scale sculpture of the human form. In fact, they have often been cited as local precedents for the late seventh/sixth-century Etruscan rooftop terracotta statues from Murlo, variously interpreted as ancestors or divinities (e.g. Bartoloni et al. 1987, 190; Damgaard Andersen 1993, 28–9; Edlund-Berry 1993).

New discoveries also encourage a reassessment of Iron Age art. The richly carved wooden chair from Verucchio (von Eles 2002) has heightened our awareness of its capacity for explicit figurative representation and narrative, which Brendel (1995, 48) presumed did not exist prior to about 630 BC. Although fairly late in date (around 700 BC), the chair could derive from an otherwise unknown and potentially ancient local tradition of elaborate wood carving. It is generally agreed that the subject matter is based entirely on local themes and images (Torelli 1997, 52–86; von Eles 2002). Of particular relevance is the depiction of humans (or possibly monkeys) and birds on the roof tops of the two houses shown on the chair (Fig. 1d, e). The humans are in a different position to those on the urns, facing each other with arms raised, perhaps holding the cross beams. Although most authors regard them as sculpted images (e.g. Damgaard Andersen 2001, 251), as in the case of the house urns, alternative interpretations might be that they are entirely imaginary (spirits for example) or else real beings: perching birds or persons engaged in roof repairs or decoration, for example. The huge adjacent looms shown on the Verucchio chair, interwoven with figures, also illustrate considerable creativity in the

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³ ‘Per l’età del ferro... non si può parlare di un’arte monumental: né a proposito dell’architettura, rimasta probabilmente nei limiti di una ripetizione o di una elaborazione dei tipi delle primitive case-capanne... né a proposito della plastica o della pittura. Il gusto decorativo e figurale dei popoli di questo livello si manifesta pressoché esclusivamente nelle forme e nella decorazione degli oggetti minori...’
Figure 1
design of utilitarian equipment. Plainly, a figurative style of sculptural modelling and relief carving existed alongside a strong geometric tradition of incision and painting, at least in the later part of the Early Iron Age (eighth century). In fact, this should not surprise us given the relative frequency of pottery animal and human figurines in Villanovan graves.

The publication of nearly two hundred house urns from Etruria and Latium (Bartoloni et al. 1987), dated between the tenth and eighth centuries BC, facilitates a review of many aspects of Iron Age architecture and symbolic expression. Several issues are discussed in the volume, including chronology, function, origins, social significance and regional variations, although little is said about painted decoration. This is partly because the modelled and incised motifs, or those represented by applied metal foil, have survived better than any paint, which is invariably badly worn. Traces remain on only about ten examples. An urn from Tarquinia (Fig. 1c) exemplifies the problem: at the time of discovery in the late nineteenth century it was seen to be painted with elaborate white geometric and anthropomorphic motifs (Ghirardini 1882, 291–2, pl. II:14; Hencken 1968, 61, fig. 48e, f), but these have now faded or vanished. Another example from the Roman forum was originally painted in white and red, although white or yellow seems to have been more common (Bartoloni et al. 1987, nos. 64, 124). The use of white paint on Etruscan seventh-century pottery, including painted roof tiles from sites such as Acquarossa and the white on red ware of Caere, probably derives from this earlier tradition.

Villanovan geometric decoration has a striking capacity for subtle variation and elaboration in what one might infer to be the visual equivalents of allusions, metaphors or wordplay. Even the human body, or parts of it, such as heads and limbs, appears in variously codified and carefully juxtaposed forms (e.g. Fig. 4a–e). The house urn motifs include triangles, zig-zags, swastikas or other versions of crosses, meanders, hooks, circles, wavy lines, hatched bands and checkerboards. They frequently surround architectural features such as doors, floors, eaves and roof beams, although the most prominent are the panels around the walls. The significance of individual motifs has always been hard to infer (see also below), although some recurrent patterns and regional preferences have been observed (e.g. Guidi 1980; Toms 1992–93; De Angelis 2001). However, in the case of biconical jar urns, which are often finely decorated, no clear link could be established between the gender or status of the deceased and the panel motifs. The presence of the latter on house urns (e.g. Fig. 3a–c), and so perhaps on real houses, suggested to Guidi (1980, 56) that they might represent badges or emblems of group or kinship affiliation, but this remains largely speculative.

It is reasonable to infer that house urns were inspired by real buildings; several correspondences with excavated structures have been noted, although the faithfulness of all details to life-size counterparts is debatable. For example, some authors have reasoned that the roof timbers were only visible on the inside of actual buildings, while others have suggested that they helped to hold down thatching (Bartoloni et al. 1985; Bartoloni et al. 1987, 135–43). Can we infer that the decoration of the urns is based on that of real houses? This is a common assumption. For example, the walls of a reconstructed Villanovan house at Bologna (Margherita

4 However, it is hard to see how this would have been effective in securing thatch, which is normally held by cords or netting. Heavy timbers so placed would more likely crush and be detrimental to thatching, which needs to air and be placed evenly. For the possible use of clay plaster on roofing, see Moffa (2002, 38–9). Alternatives to thatching might be the use of tree bark, wooden planks or shingles (flat wooden slabs resembling ceramic tiles), hand split from logs, as found on Anglo-Saxon and Viking buildings, and also more widely on traditional wooden houses.
gardens) have been painted with geometric panels characteristic of urns (Fig. 2), and similar motifs are often shown on reconstruction drawings of houses and settlements (e.g. Carroli and Nardin 1998; Bietti Sestieri and De Santis 2001, fig. 8e). Iron Age houses in central Italy generally had timber frameworks, sometimes with pisé walls: a clayish matrix with ground potsherds and organic inclusions, such as straw, given a final skim coat in the case of a building at Fidenae, which had the potential to be painted or incised (Bietti Sestieri and De Santis 2001). The recently reconstructed version of this building has also been decorated with characteristic house urn motifs using a wooden comb.5

While we lack evidence of wall decoration from excavated buildings, most authors seem willing to accept these reconstructions (e.g. Broccato and Galluccio 2001, 301), or at least give them the benefit of the doubt. Nevertheless, one could argue – as does Wikander (2001, 270) – that the house urns were simply decorated like other pottery vessels, and not in imitation of real buildings. Certainly, it is hardly likely that the latter were adorned with metal foil, like some of the urns. Nor is it easy to take literally the presence of incised or painted decoration

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5 See also: http://www.collesalario.it/capanna and http://www.comune.bologna.it/museoarcheologico/didattica/capan.htm (last viewed 28.06.05).
between the roof beams, especially if these spaces were thatched. Even if one accepts that some of the decoration alludes to that of real houses, it is possible that what is shown on the exterior of the urns was on the interior of the buildings. Iron Age house models in the Aegean (Schattner 1990) and central Europe give rise to similar uncertainties, although there is archaeological evidence from central Europe to suggest that some of the sculpted decoration is based on real examples (Büchsenschütz 1989, 298).

In Italy, the question is not easily resolved. Later Etruscan urns in the form of rectangular boxes, like the ‘Calabresi’ urn from Cerveteri, are of little help since, apart from their roofs, they have no architectural features on their sides, which look more like chests. Reconstructions of Iron Age buildings with decorated walls are therefore inevitably somewhat hypothetical, although some further observations are warranted. One is that the house-urn motifs (see below) were not restricted to pottery, since they also recur on bronze and wooden objects. They were probably widespread, perhaps also on textiles, for which geometric designs are inherently suited. In fact, analogies have been noted between decoration on cloth from Verucchio and on metal plaques (von Els 2002, 213), as well as between geometric motifs in Etruscan tomb painting and counterparts on textiles (Naso 1996, 346–52).

The decoration of house urns is often richer and more varied than that of other vessels, and some motifs seem well designed or placed to fit the architectural format. Moreover, there are one or two specific motifs, including the triangles around doors (below), which are also encountered in seventh-century Etruscan tomb painting, where they are more likely a form of architectural, rather than specifically ceramic, decoration.

This is not the place for an exhaustive review of mural decoration on prehistoric houses, documented widely, if sporadically, in the Near East and Europe. Even in the classical or Mediterranean world, we would know little about murals were it not for a few exceptional accidents of preservation, as at Thera or Pompeii. In prehistoric Italy, apart from scattered instances of tomb or wall painting in the Neolithic and Copper Ages (in Sardinia for example: Contu 2000), there is plenty of evidence for smooth clay plaster coatings, sometimes covered with a red slip, on the inside walls of later prehistoric buildings, including some made of stone (for example, in Sicily and Calabria: Leighton 1993, 26; Moffa 2002). In Etruria, hut 1 at Luni contained fragments of wall plaster with moulded decoration of parallel cordons in relief, which the excavator likened to the ribbing around doors and windows on contemporary house urns (Östenberg 1967, 40; Naso 1996, 413). Recent work at Tarquinia has also found examples in Early Iron Age settlement contexts of baked clay or daub wall cladding coated on one side with white plaster, which would certainly have modified the appearance of a building (Iaia et al. 2001, 7–8). Large-scale non-funerary painting and use of decorative drapery are also likely to have existed in the Orientalizing and Archaic periods (Naso 1990, 469–70).

One should bear in mind that even unpainted walls have a colour, imparted by the materials used, which could have been manipulated or selected with the intention of creating particular chromatic effects. In this sense at least there is no such thing as a blank wall. Tacitus makes some interesting comments in this regard about indigenous buildings in Germania: ‘They do not even make use of stones or wall-tiles; for all purposes they employ rough-hewn timber, ugly and unattractive-looking. Some parts, however, they carefully smear over with a clay of such purity and brilliance that it looks like painting or coloured design’ (Germania 16).6 The

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idea of adding colour to the outside of a building, albeit exposed to the elements, is not unlikely, especially in Etruria, where faint traces of paint have occasionally been observed on the exterior stonework of large burial mounds (e.g. tumulus II at Caere, which covers the seventh-century ‘hut tomb’; Naso 1990, 465). Leaving aside the more elaborately painted Etruscan tombs, which are by far the best known and frequently reproduced, it is notable that much of the earliest decoration consisted of no more than a uniform monochrome colouring of large areas of the tomb wall, which does not need to be explained in terms of any particular external source of inspiration or expertise.

URN DECORATION AND TOMB PAINTING

Despite obvious differences, Villanovan house urns and Etruscan chamber tombs share certain features. The chamber tombs are commonly associated with inhumation, but they could also contain cremations, like the urns. Chamber tombs are generally associated with couples, family or multiple burials, by contrast with Iron Age rites, which are centred mainly on individual cremations. House urns are frequently identified with special status adult males in Etruria, although it has recently been noted that some might have held cremated couples (Iaia 1999, 34–8). They could represent high-status houses, or even non-domestic buildings, such as shrines, although we lack evidence and criteria to be able to identify such special-purpose buildings with confidence. Likewise, Etruscan painted chamber tombs evoke a house, at least in architectural terms, and they are generally associated with high-status burials. In both cases, however, one might argue about their symbolic significance and whether, for example, they allude to the deceased’s former terrestrial home or to another anticipated home in the next world.

There are similarities and differences in the decoration. A propensity for sculptural modelling links the house urns with early chamber tombs, especially those of seventh-century Caere in which many features that would have been mainly of timber are represented in carved stone. House urns are modelled in reverse – the decoration is external rather than internal – although both pay considerable attention to the roof and the doors. Comparing house urns with the earlier painted tombs of the seventh–sixth centuries, one observes certain generic analogies, which include fitting the decoration to an architectural format while respecting symmetry. Much early tomb painting served to highlight architectural elements of structures that still resemble huts, such as the ‘tomba della capanna’ at Tarquinia, dated around 575–550 BC (Steingräber 1986, 296; Naso 1996). In both cases, the decoration is generally balanced on opposite walls, or on each side of a door or roof, while the contours of fixtures (doors, windows, eaves, floors) are emphasised, leaving central wall spaces empty or free for larger motifs, framed by linear bands. A sense of equilibrium and structural stability is often imparted to house urns by alternating one panel design with another. Overall, despite the differences in style and media, one may infer some common ground in the underlying approach.

The end-wall or entrance where the triangular zone, or tympanum, is created by the sloping roof is most prominent on both urns and painted tombs. Emphasis is given to the ridge pole and the summit of the urns by crossed roof beams which sometimes resemble horns or else assume head-like zoomorphic or bird forms, usually facing outwards and occasionally inwards (Bartoloni et al. 1987, 47, fig. 26 no. 57). Representations of houses in Alpine rock art also frequently show projecting crossed roof beams (e.g. Büchsenschütz 1989, 295, with references). Several scholars have noted that these are not very different, at least in conception, from the
seventh-century terracotta akroteria of Etruscan houses, well exemplified at Acquarossa (Rystedt 1983, 161).

In the case of the three house urns with moulded human figures on the roof (noted above), one might suggest a precedent not only for the roof terracottas from Murlo, but also, more generally, for the importance of the tympanum in early tomb painting. This elevated space generally receives the most elaborate treatment, and is frequently decorated with counterpoised animals facing each other in a heraldic manner. In a discussion of Archaic tomb painting, Torelli (1997, 142) infers that the pediments, like their counterparts in temples, were considered heroic, superhuman or sacral zones. Therefore, just as one might infer that the aristocratic couple in the tympanum of the Hunting and Fishing tomb had attained a state of blissful apotheosis, so one might suggest that the roof-top images (notably birds and perhaps ancestor figures) of the Iron Age urns or houses allude to supernatural realms, emphatically set on high in a kind of visual coup de théâtre.

Removable model doors, often decorated, are prominent on the fronts of urns, while door motifs are common in tomb paintings, where their significance may vary: symbolic doors to another world, or, more prosaically, entrances to tombs or houses. The painted doors differ in style (and probably in significance) from those of the house urns, although both can serve as monolithic anchoring motifs which help to subdivide and structure the arrangement of adjacent decoration. In both cases, their surrounds or frames are sometimes decorated with bands or zig-zags (e.g. Fig. 1c) making them more prominent (cf. Naso 1996, 404–5).

A further analogy between urns and tombs is seen in the geometric motifs on their roofs (exterior) and ceilings (interior) respectively. In the case of urns, these often take the form of zig-zags, hooks or circles between the beams (e.g. Figs. 3a, b, 4f), which have at least generic counterparts in the circles and rosettes of painted tombs; these last also recall the concentric designs on late Villanovan metalwork, although they are attributed to inspiration from eastern Mediterranean sources by Naso (1996, 343). In addition, the horizontal bands of decoration, such as meanders, on the dados or cornices of the urns (e.g. Fig. 3c) are not very different in design from the wave and geometric patterns encountered in painted tombs, such as the Tomb of the Monkey at Chiusi (Steingräber 1986, 273–5).

On the other hand, there are several obvious differences between house urns and painted tombs in subject matter and style: notably the abandonment of geometric decoration in favour of more explicit, or less abbreviated, renditions of humans, animals and narrative. Certainly one cannot point to anything on house urns comparable with the overt references to aristocratic life encountered in Etruscan tomb painting, with its scenes of banquets, dancing, sporting occasions, horsemanship and hunting, although such activities were doubtless an important part of life in the Early Iron Age as well. One can, however, note that schematic human and animal motifs occasionally appear on house urns, while anthropomorphic subjects are quite common on jar urns, notably those in which two seated figures seem to be engaged in a tête-à-tête (Hencken 1968, 27–33). Two house urns from Tarquinia and Osteria dell’Osà have prominent interlinked figures set around the walls, perhaps alluding to a dance or procession (Fig. 4a, b). Another from Marino has incised figures in the tympanum as well as on the door (Fig. 4d), and an urn from Castel Gandolfo (Fig. 4e) has two counterpoised figures on the door with one arm raised in a manner that is reminiscent, arguably, of the two figures placed either side of the door in the tomb of the Augurs at Tarquinia (Steingräber 1986, 283), although quite different in style.

It is not easy to situate these Iron Age figures within a narrative or recognisable context as we are generally able to do with those in later tomb paintings. One should be wary of asserting
Figure 3
House urns from: a. Vetulonia (H 42.2 cm), b. Vetulonia (H 39 cm), c. Vetulonia (H 30 cm), d. Vulci (H 33.5 cm) (after Bartoloni et al. 1987, nos. 14, 4, 19 and 72).
Figure 4
House urns from: a. Osteria dell’Osa (H 24 cm), b. Tarquinia (H 28), c. Vetulonia (H 42.2 cm), d. Marino (H 25.5 cm), e. Castel Gandolfo (H 27 cm), f. Vulci (H 28.5) (after Bartoloni et al. 1987, nos. 133, 75, 18, 154, 67; Gierow 1964, fig. 190).
direct links between them or inferring identical meanings on the basis of no more than vague and possibly coincidental similarities. Nevertheless, it is possible, as Torelli (1997, 30) suggests, that they are mourners involved in funerary ceremonies, some of which herald those inferred to be taking place in later Etruscan representations, including tomb paintings. Jannot (2002) has also argued that they could represent aspects of Villanovan funerary rites that were still known, albeit in modified form, in later periods: notably, a ritual dance or procession (the linked figures on the house urns), and a funerary discourse in honour of the deceased (the paired figures on jar urns), for which he cites a number of Etruscan works of later date as analogies, including relief carvings from Chiusi. Not every detail of the analysis is entirely convincing. For example, it does not seem obvious that the pendant line between the legs of some house urn figures represents a tail (e.g. Fig. 4d), and therefore one may not necessarily agree that they are forerunners of Etruscan satyrs or Sileni (Jannot 2002, 10). Nor is it absolutely clear that the figures on the Capua urn (Jannot 2002, fig. 1, c) are standing. If, instead, they are sitting, their supposed tails could be seats. Likewise, the figures on the Tarquinia askos (Jannot 2002, pl. Ia) are not necessarily children. However, the main thesis – that certain forms of Etruscan ritual performance have a Villanovan ancestry – seems entirely credible. This has also been suggested with reference to a wide range of figurative imagery by Damgaard Andersen (1993) and by scholars (e.g. Tuck 1994) who propose Villanovan origins for the Etruscan banquet.

Unfortunately there is no fine-grain chronology for house urns, many of which are from uncertain contexts. Typological studies suggest regional rather than chronological variations. Many probably belong within the ninth century, although the form was very likely still common in the eighth century, as suggested by some of the fairly elaborate examples from Vetulonia and Bisenzo. The sheet bronze urn from Vulci, covered in discs and birds, is probably also a relatively late example (Fig. 4f). There are indications of a move towards greater elaboration in metalwork, as well as in funerary art and symbolism more generally, in the course of the Early Iron Age.

The popularity of bird and disc motifs is well attested in the eighth century in much of Hallstatt Europe. In the Italian context, the discs are sometimes equated with solar symbolism, largely on the basis of a few examples with triangular rays (Peroni 1994, 148), although many could equally represent other astral symbols, even the moon. In certain cases, however, such as the metal house urn from Vulci with concentric circles between the birds on its sides, they could allude to shields. If so, this might be a local precedent for the six large discs painted on the walls of the Campana tomb at Veii, dated around 600 BC (Steingräber 1986, 374–6), and for the shields which were probably originally suspended around the walls of some wealthy Etruscan chamber tombs (for example, in the Regolini-Galassi tomb at Caere, the Avvolta tomb at Tarquinia and, as shown by relief carvings, in the tomb of the Shields and Chairs at Caere). Naso (1996, 405–12), however, regards this as the Etruscan adoption of a Near Eastern practice.

Likewise, it has often been surmised that the swastika was a cosmic symbol. In some contexts it may also have served to demarcate space in a symbolic quadripartite manner. Pacciarelli (2002, 321) has suggested that this could be linked with later Etruscan ideas of cosmology, envisaged according to a quadripartite scheme, as reflected, for example, in the prescriptions of Etruscan divination (auspicium), which interpreted the flight of birds in relation to their position in the sky. The presence of birds in Villanovan funerary symbolism might be explained in terms of their potential role as intermediaries – messengers or escorts – between the terrestrial and non-terrestrial worlds. This suggestion is encouraged by the importance of
birds in Etruscan augury and early Roman religion. Those on two house urns from Vulci and Vetulonia (Fig. 4c, f) bear some resemblance respectively to a long-necked aquatic type, possibly a wader, and a rather squat duck-like form, although they are too schematised to permit any particular identification.

Analyses can be drawn with the row of five birds depicted in the Tomb of the Ducks at Veii (Fig. 5a), which is one of the oldest painted tombs (roughly 675–650 BC). These birds – always called ducks, though they might equally be fat wood pigeons – are generally likened to types encountered on Greek Late Geometric pottery (Naso 1990, 458–60, with further references). The presence in this same tomb of Subgeometric vases with ‘heron’ motifs might appear to support this connection, and has undoubtedly encouraged the idea that the Veii tomb painter was a vase painter (e.g. Steingräber 1986, 374). Leach (1987, 119), however, noted some stylistic differences between the tomb and vase paintings. In any case, this would not necessarily negate a connection with indigenous traditions, as exemplified by the row of birds on the Vetulonia house urn (and see also Bartoloni et al. 1987, no. 22, which could be birds). One might suggest that the local interest in Greek geometric representations of birds was due to the long-standing importance of birds in the indigenous context.

The way in which birds are shown in Archaic Etruscan tomb painting is also worth noting. The so-called tomb of the Augurs (around 520 BC) acquired its name from the idea that the two bearded men on the right-hand wall are observing the flight of the birds above the athletes’ heads. This is now generally regarded as a misnomer since these individuals are more likely adjudicators of the adjacent sporting contests (Steingräber 1986, 283). However, the position of the birds in this and some other painted tombs, almost as background or companion motifs surrounding other more prominent scenes, is reminiscent of the way in which they were employed, almost 200 years earlier, on the Verucchio chair.

There are one or two other motifs on house urns that only distantly recall details of later tomb painting, but are perhaps worth considering. For example, an elaborately decorated urn from Osteria dell’Osa (Bietti Sestieri 1992, 568–9) presents a tree-like motif, consisting of a vertical stem with several branches, set between panels. Might this be a precedent for the recurrent use of tree-like motifs in later tomb painting, which, like birds, enliven and fill the spaces between figures, helping to structure the decoration, while no doubt possessing some symbolic significance? In certain painted tombs, for example, the vegetation may allude to cult places in the open or sacred groves. Likewise, the presence of objects (bronze rings in a few cases) hanging from the edge of the roof on house urns is reminiscent of the hanging garlands or hunting trophies shown dangling from the cornices in some painted tombs (for example in the Tomb of the Hunter; Steingräber 1986, 295–6).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As noted, general works on Etruscan art pay limited attention to the Villanovan phase and are more often concerned with sources of innovation and change. Plainly, in the case of Etruscan tomb painting (and many other aspects of craft production) in the seventh century, the new prominence of exotic motifs, such as palmettes, lions, mythological creatures and humans in the Orientalizing style, is striking. Their adoption, along with many imported luxuries, undoubtedly reflects the more active participation of local elites in rapidly growing networks of social and economic interaction. At the same time, some formerly widespread symbols of the Iron Age geometric repertoire, such as swastikas, panel motifs and rather abbreviated
Figure 5  

anthropomorphic representations, begin to disappear, for reasons that are hard to specify, but are possibly linked to changes in religious beliefs or social changes, if not simply to artistic traditions and fashions.

One generalising explanation for a decline in forms of expression that made extensive use of geometric symbols, the significance of which was probably rather codified, could be that they required familiarity with the specific cultural context in order to be appreciated as anything more than ornamentation. By contrast, the new and increasingly mimetic Orientalizing motifs could be more easily read, albeit in different ways, thereby communicating more effectively across cultural frontiers, which was important at a time of increasing social interaction amongst elites. Their appeal also derived from desirable associations: their contemporary use by privileged groups in the eastern Mediterranean and their connotations of status and power, as represented by the horsemanship, domination of wild animals, mythical creatures and luxurious ornamentation of the Campana and Painted Lions tombs at Veii and Caere (Fig. 5b). By implication, however, one might also expect to encounter greater cultural continuity and a persistence of traditional motifs and styles in areas either geographically or socially further removed from foci of elite culture. To some extent, this may be suggested by contrasts occasionally noted between the central-northern inland parts of Etruria and the southern coastal zones with their large urban centres.

Questions also remain, however, about why specific motifs were adopted and whether they retained the same significance everywhere, a recurrent problem in studies of the Orientalizing phenomenon, and in Etruscan art more generally. For example, was the Etruscan interest in wild or mythical animals in the Orientalizing style due to their very strangeness and novelty, to their easy assimilation as a result of pre-existing cross-cultural practices and perspectives, or to other associations and perceptions? Torelli (1981, 173) suggests that an underlying compatibility with an indigenous prehistoric tradition provides the key.

Such questions are sometimes lost, however, in discussions about technical skill and the identity of the artist-craftsman in terms of an indigenous or foreign origin, which can lead to subjective or contradictory conclusions. For example, Naso (1990, 468) suggests that the more elaborate seventh-century tomb paintings should be attributed to ‘maestranze specializzate’ and therefore, quite possibly, to immigrants. Yet he also regards much early tomb painting as pioneering or experimental in character, especially when it was applied directly to untreated bare walls by persons deemed ‘... as yet incapable of adequately solving questions linked with the technique of wall painting’ (Naso 1990, 439, my translation). One might counter, however, that the first tomb painters, whatever their origins, could easily have plastered the tomb walls had they wanted to; that they did not is more likely due to different priorities, rather than lack of skill. It may be relevant in this connection that tomb paintings were for the dead, and not for a living audience, or at least only temporarily for the latter. Jannot also risks blaming the Iron Age craftsman for our inability to tell whether human figures on house urns are standing or moving when he declares that ‘... only the best artisans were capable of transcribing this movement in a convincing manner’ (Jannot 2002, 7). It may be more productive to resist value judgements and the tendency to explain the development of Etruscan art in terms of competence.

The point, therefore, is not to deny the importance of innovation through cultural transmission, but to balance it with a better evaluation of continuities, not just superficial similarities. In this context, local or pre-existing traditions represent a starting point for research, but they also highlight a need to consider contrasting and often unfamiliar forms of symbolism and cognition; in short, a need to revisit Etruscan Iron Age ‘art’.
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