Etruscan Athletics
Glimpses of an Elusive Civilization

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Background

The Etruscans represent one of the earliest examples of hidden media coverage—always originating with the authors of antiquity that has been perpetuated by modern scholars and writers. Greco-Roman sources used such epithets as cruel, deceitful, degenerate in describing the Etruscans; Etruscan women were called wanton and their behavior was compared to that of prostitutes. Unfortunately, we do not have contemporary Etruscan documents from which to learn their opinion of the Greeks and Romans.

The prejudiced reports of ancient sources are readily explained. To the Greeks and Romans the Etruscans were aliens, commercial competitors, and military enemies. The underlying but pervasive motif of most Roman historical literature was the glorification of Rome; the Etruscans were not only former rulers of Rome but also former allies of Rome's most dreaded enemies, the Carthaginians. The Greeks, if they refer to the Etruscans at all, do so only in a derogatory manner. The Etruscan language and culture were foreign and different, although Etruscans used a derivation of the Greek alphabet for writing, their language did not originate from the same Indo-European roots as Greek and Latin. Obviously, there were some basic communication problems coupled with the typical human distaste for things different. It is necessary to keep in mind the biased viewpoint of the historical record and the ramifications of the dearth of nonfunerary material in the archaeological record before studying any aspect of the Etruscan civilization.

The Etruscans remain silent, without a voice to raise in their own defense: they left us no wealth of literature as the Greeks and Romans did. Extant Etruscan written documents are limited mainly to formulaic funerary epitaphs carved over the entrances to tombs, or on sarcophagi and funerary urns. A typical inscription might read: "This is the tomb (name of deceased), son of (patronym, mother's maiden name) and of (patronym, father's name) (number of years) and served (as a (occupation)." These documents, due to their brevity and repetitive wording, have provided insufficient data to allow for a secure translation of the Etruscan language, but contrary to modern conceptions, the language does not remain undeciphered. It is possible to read these funerary inscriptions and glean valuable information about Etruscan vocabulary and syntax, as well as interesting information about the use, and perhaps their value as family burial plots and the connection of certain names with specific cities, but it is not yet possible to translate with certainty the limited number of longer inscriptions from nonfunerary contexts. More of these nonfunerary texts are needed to supply linguists with the repertoire to achieve a complete understanding of the Etruscan language.

The Etruscan literary record is similarly clouded by an abundance of physical remains related to funerary practices and a corresponding lack of material from nonfunerary contexts. It was the accidental discovery of tombs during the Renaissance that first brought Etruscan culture to the attention of modern scholars. During the subsequent centuries, vast private collections of Etruscan objects, for the most part from burials and without any accompanying documentation as to provenience or context, were amassed. Though these objects reflect the diversity of Etruscan art and as such are important to the study of art history, the lack of information as to their discovery renders them of little value to the archaeologist trying to reconstruct a picture of Etruscan civilization.

Etruscan cities were more difficult to locate and often proved inaccessible to either robbers or excavators since they either lay beneath modern cities or cities continually occupied since Etruscan times (such as Orvieto) or had been destroyed in subsequent occupations by Romans and later peoples. It is only since the end of World War II that an effort has been made to locate and excavate Etruscan towns; this work has been carried out by the Scandinavians at Acqua Rossa, Luni, and San Giovenale, and by the Americans at the site of Populonia (Murlo, in the Province of Siena).

Evidence for Games from Tomb Paintings

A knowledge of Etruscan athletics and competitive sports is of course influenced by the very same factors that affect and tend to prejudice our view of all things Etruscan—the lack of Etruscan literary sources, the limitation of tangible evidence to mostly funerary contexts, and the notion that the Etruscan civilization be viewed as a by-product of the Greek experience and a by-product of the greatness that was Rome. By looking at some of the extant Etruscan renditions of games and athletes from tomb paintings, vase painting, sculptural friezes, and small-scale statuary, and by a careful interpretation of some ancient sources, it is possible to discern a certain "Etruscaness" in the way they illustrated athletic events in various media, and also a spirit and an attitude toward athletic competition very different from that of their contemporaries.

The best evidence for Etruscan athletics comes from some 29 of the approximately 200 richly painted tombs that include athletic scenes in their decoration. The ancient Etruscan city of Tarquinia is most renowned for its painted tomb chambers; it has more than 140; other fine examples are known from Chiusi, Cerveteri, Veii, Orvieto, and Vulci along with other lesser and isolated examples. The scenes depicted in these tombs clearly show that the Etruscans participated in many of the same events as the Greeks chariot and horse-racing, boxing, wrestling, running, jumping with weights, and discus and javelin throwing. Many of the tomb paintings contain banquet scenes and dancing along with athletics; these may be interpreted as representations of the funerary celebrations held to honor the deceased. A number of tombs also contained vases, both locally made and Greek imports, depicting athletic competitions. The Etruscans clearly loved sports and considered them an important aspect of their lives.

Three tombs from Tarquinia (all dating to 500-520 B.C.) are of special interest since they contain illustrations of a definitely non-Greek form of athletic competition along with more familiar sporting events: the Tomb of the Etruscan (so named because of its paintings of many athletic events, but also largely because of its propitiation-
Historical Background

During the 6th and early 5th centuries B.C., the Etruscans and their allies, the Carthaginians, were in virtual control of maritime traffic in the western Mediterranean. This put them in direct conflict with the Greek colonies in south Italy and Sicily. At its greatest extent, Etruscan territory reached far beyond its traditional borders of the Tiber and Arno rivers—to the south as far as the Po Valley and to the south in the area of the Bay of Naples (see map, Fig. 3). Expansion to the south provoked additional hostilities with the south Italian Greeks. It was during this same time that the city of Rome was ruled by Etruscan kings.

Etruscan fortunes began to decay but irreversibly during the 5th century B.C. This was brought about by two factors: the loss of their supremacy at sea due to the end of their treacherous alliance with the Carthaginians, who by this time had consolidated power bases in western Sicily and Sardinia, and the rise to power of the Greek colony at Syracuse in Sicily. In 480 B.C., Etruscan Syracusan, the last Etruscan king, was expelled from Rome, ending Etruscan rule in that city and signaling the beginning of the Roman Republic.

These losses proved crippling to the Etruscans, both politically and economically. Henceforth, their eventual subjugation by Rome, the Etruscan states as inland territories, cut off from the rich maritime trade they had once enjoyed thanks to Syracuse and the Carthaginians. Unfortunately, the loss of Rome, the only easily accessible crossing point on the Tiber River, now deprived them of overland contact with the south as well. In 396 B.C., Veii became the first Etruscan city to fall to the Romans with the capture of Volsinii in 205 B.C., all of Etruria was under Roman domination.

Pelesinella is shown running behind an armed figure on horseback; it is unclear whether the two are interacting or not. The Phereas' clothing is similar to that worn by the soliary Phereas in the Tomb of the Augurs, consisting of only a tunic (his tunic is made of black and white checkered pattern) and the characteristic cap and bearded mask (Fig. 6). Any interpretation of these Phereas figures must have been the center of much controversy. The name "Phereas" seems to refer to a general type of masked performer rather than to a specific personage or deity. Several scholars have associated the word with the Latin personae, which originally referred to the masks worn by actors and later came to mean the character or actor himself.
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Etruscan art of a physical structure specifically for athletics (Fig. 8). The stands are built of wood and covered with a canopy. The spectators, both men and women (the woman is on the top tier wearing a small rounded cap known as a turrula), are shown in animated discussion. The upper tier seems to be the reserved-seat section for the more dignified and well-dressed fans, while the lower level is taken up by lounging male spectators without the advantage of actual seating.

Further Archaeological Evidence

Examples of athletic competition are also found in other Etruscan art forms. A
The Evidence

Liberatory evidence supplies some additional information on possible occasions for Etruscan athletic competitions. Herodotus (Book I, lines 166–167) recounts the story of the game held by the Etruscan people of Caere to atone for the stoning to death of their Greek prisoners.

Etruscan games may also have been held in conjunction with religious festivals. It is likely that these games took place on the basic athletic features of the Etruscans, such as the palaestra. Although there are no direct references to such games, it is possible that they were held in conjunction with the regular religious festivals such as the Volturna. The location of the Etruscan Volturna is still open to debate, but it is important to note that such events were held in conjunction with central political events, such as the elections of the Etruscan and the Latin tribes. It was for these reasons that the Etruscan games were held in conjunction with the various religious and athletic festivals of the Etruscans, such as the Volturna and the Latini and Etruscan games.

Etruscan art is characterized by a variety of themes, including hunting, horse racing, and athletic activities. These themes are often depicted in various media, including terracotta, bronze, and ivory. The Etruscans were skilled in the production of these media, and their art is characterized by a strong sense of realism and a sense of movement.

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12 Relief of the Circus Maximus, with details of the spina. White and Reiner, Römische Amphitheater und Stadion, Zürich, 1981, fig. 62.