

THE TOMB OF THE BARON RECONSIDERED

(Con le tavole XX-XXI f. t.)

Since the Tomb of the Baron was discovered at Tarquinia by Baron Kestner in 1827, its paintings have fascinated visitors and given rise to discussions among scholars. The paintings, which can be dated to before 500 B.C.¹, differ considerably in technique, style, composition and motifs from other Archaic and Classical Etruscan tomb-paintings.

Most Etruscan tomb-paintings dating from before the fourth century B.C. represent, as is well known, scenes with a number of lively figures involved in activities such as dancing, banqueting, wrestling, horse-racing, etc. The main scene in the Tomb of the Baron consists of three standing figures; one of them holds up a large cup in the manner of a solemn toast. The cup forms the centre of the scene and the motif has no immediate parallels in other Etruscan tombs.

The figures have been outlined with and subsequently also filled in with grey paint before being covered with large areas of bright colours an unusual technique not found in other Etruscan tomb-paintings². The coloured areas stand out against a white background and have few interior details. The atmosphere is often considered more Greek than that of other Etruscan tomb-paintings³.

On the back wall, opposite the entrance of the tomb (*tav. XX a*), there is a scene with a woman at the right and a bearded man and a young flute-player at the left. Next to the bearded man holding the cup is a young flute-player and opposite them a woman dressed in a light-coloured chiton with a dark red, almost wine-coloured border. Over this, she wears a bright, brownish red himation and on her head a tutulus, covered by the himation. She lifts her arm towards the man and the kylix, which he is holding in his left hand. The central position of the kylix is further accentuated by a vertical row of green buds, not unlike tulips, which divides the space between the woman and the man and the young flute-player into two halves.

¹ Cf. for instance, O. Brendel, *Etruscan Art*, Harmondsworth 1978, p. 194 and S. STEINGRÄBER (ed.), *Etruskische Wandmalerei*, Stuttgart 1985, pp. 293, 396.

² M. PALLOTTINO, *Etruscan Painting. An Introduction to the Pictorial Art of the Etruscans*, Lausanne 1952, p. 56.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

The man is represented with his arm around the shoulders of the flute-player so that these two figures are closely connected. They are taking a step forward towards the woman who is standing still and upright.

This central group is flanked by two horsemen. The horseman to the left of the central group is riding a black or dark grey horse with a light-coloured mane and tail. He is almost naked except for a piece of dark red cloth over his left shoulder. The horseman to the right is riding a brownish red horse, also with a light-coloured tail and mane. He is dressed in a black or dark grey chlamys with a light-coloured lining. He also wears grey, pointed shoes, in contrast to the left horseman. Both horsemen are holding short, red whips in their hands and seem to be urging the horses on. The horses take a step forward from each direction towards the central group. They are, however, separated from the central group by stylized trees with pointed, green leaves. Similar trees are also placed behind the horsemen. Behind the left horseman and in front of the right one, there are red garlands or fillets, hanging from the taenia, framing the upper part of the painting.

On the left-hand wall of the tomb, there is a similar group consisting of three figures: a standing woman and two young men leading horses (*tav. XX b*). The woman is dressed in a light-coloured chiton, a bright, brownish red himation with green borders, drawn up as a veil and covering a tutulus. The young men are standing on either side of her, opposite each other and in front of their horses, which they are holding by the reins. They are dressed in dark red chlamydes. The horse to the left is black or very dark with a light-coloured mane and tail, and the horse to the right is reddish-brown. All three figures show great similarity to the figures in the painting on the back wall. The himation of the woman is of the same colour and so are the horses. The black horse is also in this case to the left and the brownish red horse to the right. The only significant difference is that here both the young horsemen are dressed in similar chlamydes. Above the left horse hangs a red fillet. The woman is lifting her himation in front of her face and the young men lift their right arms towards her. One or two fingers are outstretched. In their left hands they are holding the reins. All three human figures are standing upright, while the horses are lifting one front and one back hoof and seem to be taking a step forward, just as in the main scene opposite the tomb entrance.

On the right-hand wall of the tomb (*tav. XX c*), two young men with horses are standing opposite each other. They are both dressed in chlamydes like the young men on the opposite, left-hand wall. The horse held by the young man to the left is again black or very dark, while the young man to the right holds a reddish brown horse just as on the opposite wall. Both young men are wearing red fillets around their right arms, which they are stretching out towards each other. In their left hands, they are both holding the reins of their horses as on the opposite wall. Again there is a considerable similarity between these figures and the horsemen flanking the main scene.

The paintings are framed above and below by taeniae consisting of groups of

red and black horizontal bands. In the tympanum above the entrance, there are opposing hippocamps, each with two dolphins.

Various interpretations of the scenes have been offered over the years and most are concerned mainly with the painting on the back wall. A *ver sacrum* has been suggested, or a family scene⁴ F. Poulsen took all the scenes in the tomb to represent preparations for feasting and dancing⁵. According to Pallottino, a family scene possibly replaces the banquet scene found in many Etruscan tombs. In his view, the woman in the central group is the wife of the bearded man, the owner of the tomb, and the mother of the two young horsemen flanking the group⁶. H. Leisinger saw the woman as a « great lady or goddess » and the two young horsemen as the Dioscuri and her servants⁷. According to O. Brendel, the group may portray Leda or Helen and the Dioscuri⁸. E. Simon has offered an interpretation based on the identification of the trees separating the figures in this group as laurel trees, often associated with Apollo and Dionysos, and suggested that the scene may represent Dionysos and Semele or Ariadne with the Dioscuri⁹. Å. Åkerström has compared the composition of the group, and especially the overlapping figures of the bearded man and the flute-player, with Hittite groups showing the god Sharruma laying his arm around the neck of king Tudhalija IV¹⁰, and in a later publication interpreted the Etruscan scene as a « Dionysiac version » brought to Etruria through Ionic Greek influence¹¹.

None of these interpretations are entirely satisfactory in spite of having plausible aspects. The stylized character of the trees and the lack of other spring vegetation makes the interpretation of a *ver sacrum* rather unlikely. Trees of this kind appear in many other Etruscan tomb-paintings where the motifs are more easily interpreted and clearly have no emphasis on spring. Poulsen's interpretation of the scenes in the Tomb of the Baron as the preparation for a banquet is also unsatisfactory, since the activities of the figures differ strongly from those of the figures in scenes that obviously have to do with such preparations¹².

⁴ P. DUCATI, *Die etruskische italo-hellenistische und römische Malerei*, Vienna 1941, p. XXXI (family scene) and F. MESSERSCHMIDT, *Beiträge zur Chronologie der etruskischen Wandmalerei*, Halle 1928, p. 44 (*ver sacrum*).

⁵ F. POULSE, *Etruskiske Gravmaeler*, Copenhagen 1920, p. 23.

⁶ PALLOTTINO, *Etruscan Painting, cit.*, p. 57.

⁷ H. LEISINGER, *Malerei der Etrusker*, Stuttgart 1953, p. 43.

⁸ BRENDEL, *Etruscan Art, cit.*, p. 193.

⁹ E. SIMON, *Die Tomba dei Tori und der etruskischen Apollonkult*, in *JdI* LXXXVIII, 1973, pp. 27-42.

¹⁰ Å. ÅKERSTRÖM, in *Acta of the XI International Congress of Classical Archaeology*, London 1979, p. 194.

¹¹ Å. ÅKERSTRÖM, *Etruscan tomb painting-an art of many faces*, *AIRS, Opuscula Romana* XIII, 1981, p. 33.

¹² As, for instance, in the Tomb of the Lionesses.

The woman plays a key role in the scene on the back wall and it seems likely that she is the owner of the tomb, as Pallottino suggested. On the other hand, it is difficult to see the scene as a normal family scene, as he suggested. The figures in the central group are obviously separated from one another by the vertical row of green buds and the horsemen are separated from the central group by trees. The horsemen are placed much further away from the woman than are sons from their mothers in family scenes in Archaic Greek vase-paintings¹³ and in Etruscan banquet scenes and on Etruscan sarcophagi, husband and wife are much closer together than the man with the kylix and the woman.

Leisinger's interpretation of the woman as a goddess and the young horsemen as her servants, the Dioscuri, corresponds better to the relationship between the figures in the Tomb of the Baron. Brendel's suggestions that she is either Leda or Helen, the mother or sister of the Dioscuri is, however, unlikely. Considering that the most important events in the myths of Leda and Helen are connected with the amorous pursuits of Zeus and Paris, one would expect some allusion to them in the composition. The separation between the woman and the bearded man speaks against the possibility that the man is her lover, and the kylix does not play any role in the myths of Leda or Helen. The man could, of course, be a worshipper, pouring a libation to the goddess, but neither Leda nor Helen appear elsewhere in Etruscan or Greek art as the objects of that kind of cult. Nothing in the myths of the two goddesses has anything to do with death, and it is hard to see why such a motif should have been chosen for a tomb-painting.

The trees on the back wall have an undeniable likeness to laurels, but their connexion with Apollo or Dionysos may perhaps be questioned. Such trees appear in several other Etruscan wall-paintings and seem to provide an outdoor setting for banquets and games as, for instance, in the Tomb of the Triclinium, where they appear together with trees of a rather different type without leaves¹⁴. In the Tomb of the Baron, their main function seems to be to serve as dividers and space-fillers between the figures.

Åkerström's comparison between the central group on the back wall and Hittite representations of some thousand years earlier — it is suggested that the motif after «wintering» in Syria was transmitted westwards in the Orientalizing period to Ionia¹⁵, from where it is supposed to have come to Etruria with East Greek immigrants — seems rather far-fetched in view of the fact that similar embracing figures are found in Attic vase-painting from Amasis to the Berlin painter¹⁶. From a compositional point of view, the arm around the shoulders of a smaller

¹³ Cf., for instance, BEAZLEY, *ABV*, p. 145, 12.

¹⁴ Cf. PALLOTTINO, *Etruscan Painting, cit.*, pp. 76-77.

¹⁵ ÅKERSTRÖM, *Etruscan tomb painting, cit.*, pp. 24-33.

¹⁶ Cf. BEAZLEY, *ABV*, p. 152, 25, *Cab. Med.* 222.

figure and the overlapping is a simple and effective device to form one compositional element out of two figures and thus to obtain a balance with the opposite, single figure in the group. If we do not accept the possibility that the Etruscan painter could have created the composition on his own, it seems more likely that he found a prototype in some imported Attic vase than that the motif should have been derived from Hittite art. The identification of the figures as Hittite divinities¹⁷ also seems quite unlikely. It is dangerous from a methodological point of view to assume that similarity in form also means that the content is similar.

In spite of the exceptions that can be made to these earlier interpretations as a whole, certain parts of them, however, seem convincing. The interpretation of the young horsemen as the Dioscuri, which was suggested by Leisinger, Brendel and Simon is, for instance, rather likely in view of the fact that the horsemen are almost identical and yet differentiated by the colour of their horses and by their clothes. As we have seen above, one of them is almost naked, except for a red chlamys across the shoulder, whereas the other young horseman is dressed in a grey chlamys that covers most of the body and also wears shoes, something that might be expected with a pair of twins of which one is immortal and the other mortal. The horses are, as we have seen, in the one case red and in the other black. On the side walls, the two young men are identically dressed, but their horses are of different colours. The composition of the central scene and especially the horsemen is furthermore very similar to a scene on a cup by Oltos in London¹⁸. There the centre of the group is formed by two confronting figures just as in the main scene of the Tomb of the Baron, but the relationship between the figures is much closer. The figure to the left, a man leaning on a staff, seems to be speaking to the figure to the right, a young girl holding a flower. There are no separating elements like the row of tulips in the Tomb of the Baron and the figures are stretching out hands towards each other. They are flanked on each side by young horsemen in the same way as the Etruscan group, but they are not separated from the other figures by trees. The horsemen themselves and their horses correspond very closely to the Etruscan ones except that both are completely naked and do not hold whips in their hands but use both hands to hold the reins. J. Neils has recently interpreted this scene as Theseus abducting Ariadne and the Dioscuri riding to her aid¹⁹. The interpretation is supported by the fact that the cup also shows two other love affairs of Theseus.

The Dioscuri would be a rather appropriate motif in a tomb painting. According to the Greek myth, the mortal brother, Castor, was killed and descended

¹⁷ See above, note 15.

¹⁸ BEAZLEY, *ARV*², p. 58, 51, London E 41.

¹⁹ J. NEILS, *The Loves of Theseus: an early Cup by Oltos*, in *AJA* 85, 1981, pp. 177-79. I wish to thank Dr. Neils for valuable suggestions.

to Hades. The immortal brother, Pollux, however, obtained permission for them to spend half of their time together on Olympus and half in the underworld. The tomb of Castor was shown at Sparta²⁰ and, like many other Greek heroes, they were thought to live under the earth. The role of the Dioscuri in Etruscan and Italian mythology is less clear. In Roman legend, they appeared as messengers in connexion with the battle near Lake Regillus in 496 B.C. when their temple in Rome is said to have been vowed to them²¹. The part of herald in Greek mythology is generally played by another god moving between Olympus and Hades, Hermes, who combined the office of messenger of the gods with that of *psychopompos*. F. Cumont has drawn attention to the fact that the Dioscuri often appear in Roman funerary monuments abducting women and has suggested that they are acting as *psychopompoi*²². The Dioscuri abducting women is also a popular motif on late Etruscan cinerary urns. These representations were clearly inspired by the Greek myth in which the Dioscuri abducted the daughters of Leucippus, but abduction appears to have been seen as an appropriate symbol for death²³. If we go further back chronologically, we find that there are a series of representations of young men which may be interpreted as the Dioscuri, but which cannot be identified with certainty. P. Zancani-Montuoro has, for instance, identified a young abductor on a terracotta slab from Locri as one of the Dioscuri bringing Kore to Hades²⁴. On a well-known Campana slab, a pair of young men similar to each other, but characterized by some individual details and provided with wings and winged shoes — an attribute of many gods in Etruscan representations and not just of Hermes — are shown abducting a woman²⁵. The Campana slabs come from a tomb, which might suggest some funerary connexion, but it is uncertain whether they were actually made for the tomb. Two young, naked men with a horse who could be the Dioscuri are painted on a well-known 5th century ash urn from Tarquinia, flanked by stylized trees or plants (*tav. XXI a*) with leaves similar to those of the trees in the Tomb of the Baron, and two young horsemen follow a biga with a bearded man to Hades on a sarcophagus from Vulci from *ca.* 330 B.C.²⁶ There is thus some evidence for two young horsemen in funerary connexions in Etruscan and south-Italian art.

²⁰ PAUSANIAS III, 13, 1.

²¹ CIL I², 322; Cic., *nat. deor.* II 6, III 11; DION HAL. IV 13; PLUT., *Aem. Paull.* 25.

²² F. CUMONT, *Recherches sur le Symbolisme funéraire des Romains*, Paris 1942, pp. 99-103, esp. p. 101.

²³ Sirens — another type of abductors — appear, for instance, in the ceiling of the Tomb of the Monkey.

²⁴ P. ZANCANI MONTUORO, *Il rapitore di Kore nel mito locrese*, in *Rend. Acc. Napoli, N.S.* 29, 1954, pp. 79-86, esp. pp. 85-86.

²⁵ PALLOTTINO, *Etruscan Painting, cit.*, p. 34.

²⁶ BRENDDEL, *Etruscan Art, cit.*, p. 383.

The Dioscuri seem to have been popular in Attic vase-painting of the last quarter of the 6th century. In addition to the Oltos cup, there are also several black-figured vases with representations of the return and apotheosis of the Dioscuri. A. Hermary has connected the popularity of the motif with the sons of Peisistratos²⁷. In view of the occurrence of two young men in various Etruscan funerary contexts, it also seems possible to suggest that their popularity could have something to do with the Athenian export of vases to Etruria. Vases with representations of the Dioscuri may have been in demand on the Etruscan market because the motif corresponded to figures in Etruscan mythology and was suitable for funerary purposes.

The centre of the group on the back wall of the Tomb of the Baron is formed by the kylix, which the bearded man stretches towards the woman across the dividing line of tulips. The scene is reminiscent of that of a funerary relief from Chiusi from the early 5th century (*tav. XXI b*)²⁸ in which a living woman is handing a kylix to an apparently dead woman lying on a couch. The living and the dead woman are flanked by women waving branches or plants similar to the plants on the ash urn from Tarquinia. If the woman on the back wall of the Tomb of the Baron is the owner of the tomb, as Pallottino has suggested, and the bearded man her husband, the row of tulips may be a border separating the living from the dead and the scene may be a parallel to the scene on the relief from Chiusi. Her lifted arms may be a farewell gesture. Both scenes may represent part of the funerary ritual and be a *pars pro toto* for a banquet scene of the kind which is frequent in contemporary tombs. The use of the branches or plants in the relief from Chiusi suggests that the plants on the ash urn from Tarquinia and the trees in the Tomb of the Baron — if they are anything more than ornamental filling motifs or dividers — could be objects used in the ceremony for the dead.

The fillets around the arms of the young men on the right-hand wall indicate that they are present at a ceremony (and have possibly just dismounted), and the ceremony in question could be the one represented on the back wall. The young men are slightly differently dressed, but the horses are the same as in the painting on the back wall and it therefore seems possible that the same young men are represented twice, just as Theseus probably is represented in three different episodes on the Oltos cup²⁹. The woman on the left-hand wall wears a dark red himation similar to that of the woman on the back wall, and the two young horsemen are dressed alike on both walls. The horses are also the same. The scene is therefore likely to represent yet another episode connected with the other two. The woman

²⁷ A. HERMARY, *Images de l'apothéose des Dioscures*, in *BCH* 102, 1978, pp. 70-76.

²⁸ *Brit. Mus. Limestone D 18*.

²⁹ Similar combinations of episodes are also found in Etruscan art. The best-known example is the Monteleone chariot.

is, as we have seen, shown drawing up the himation in front of her face. This gesture in Greek iconography is interpreted as a courteous gesture of a lady and perhaps a gesture of salutation³⁰. The young men lift their right arms and hands with one or two fingers outstretched towards her, a gesture which may be exhortatory³¹. The scene seems to represent the meeting between the woman and the young men, and the young men must be speaking to her. If they are the Dioscuri, they are probably bidding her to come with them.

Many Etruscan tomb scenes seem to have something to do with travelling. In the previously mentioned relief from Vulci, a man is travelling in a biga and followed by two young horsemen³². Travellers are presumably also represented on the stelae from Felsina, where men are shown in carts and above a wave pattern. In the Tomb of the Funeral Couch, a bridled horse is led into the banquet, and in the Giustiniani Tomb a biga with a coachman is visible behind one of the flute-players. In the Tomb of the Ship, a man is turning his back towards the usual banqueting scene and looking out over the sea towards a ship. Brendel has interpreted the presence of the horses, the bigae and the ship as early hints of death as a journey to Hades³³. A. Pfiffig has also connected the dolphins and the hippocamps, which appear in many Etruscan tombs (they are present in the Tomb of the Baron as we have seen above, and they also appear on the short side of the ashurn from Tarquinia), as an allusion to a journey to the world of the dead³⁴. The Dioscuri who lived half of the time in Hades and half on Olympus, who were helpers in distress at sea and abductors of women, seem to be particularly suitable travelling companions.

I would, therefore, suggest that the wall-paintings in the Tomb of the Baron represent three different episodes, all related to each other, to the funeral of the woman and her departure to Hades, escorted by the Dioscuri: on the right-hand wall, the Dioscuri are represented holding fillets and leading their horses (having just arrived at the funeral ceremonies), on the back wall, the woman, the owner of the tomb, is taking farewell of the living, who salute her with a raised kylix, flanked by the Dioscuri, who are waiting in the background. On the left-hand wall, the Dioscuri bid the woman to come with them. I thus agree with some of the previously suggested identifications of isolated figures on the back wall (Pallottino's identification of the woman as the owner of the tomb and Leisinger's, Simon's and Brendel's identification of the young men as the Dioscuri), but I do not agree with any of the previously suggested interpretations of the group as a whole: a family

³⁰ G. NEUMANN, *Gesten und Gebärden in der griechischen Kunst*, Berlin 1965, pp. 41 and 179, note 134.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

³² See above, note 26.

³³ BRENDEL, *Etruscan Art, cit.*, p. 271.

³⁴ A. J. PFIFFIG, *Religio Etrusca*, Graz 1975, p. 169.

scene, Dionysos and Semele, etc. The paintings should, in my opinion, be seen as a combination of the banquet motif found in many other Tarquinian tombs and the funeral motif on the relief from Chiusi on the one hand and the travelling scenes on the other hand. The composition of the central scene seems to have been inspired by Greek vase-painting and might have been taken over from a kylix such as the Oltos cup.

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