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Ancient Etruscan Metalsmiths: The Afterlife Mirrors Life

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The Afterlife Mirrors Life

by Dianne K. deBeixedon
Looking down the long corridors of time, the ancient Etruscans emerge as a powerful people whose economic and social development was founded on their metal industry. Over the centuries, however, the Etruscans were gradually absorbed into the Roman Empire and their language disappeared.

Because written records are missing or irretrievably lost, Etruscan history is shrouded in speculation and legend, and only recently discoveries in Italy have shed light on Etruscan culture. Etruria, Italy's first great civilization, rose and flowered from 750 to 100 B.C., reaching the peak of its power from 600 to 500 B.C. Roughly, the boundaries of Etruria were the Arno river to the North; the Tiber river to the east and south; and the Tyrrenian Sea to the west (corresponding to modern Tuscany). With their military prowess, the Etruscans spread outward from central Italy. By 600 B.C., they dominated the western shore from Pisa to Rome and crossed the Tiber River, controlling much of the present province of Campania. As they moved further south near Naples, they met resistance from the residents of the Greek colony Cumae and were pushed back. They continued their northward thrust crossing the Apennines ridge, colonizing the fertile Po Valley. Their movement north was thwarted only due to pugnacious Venetian tribes.

Etruscan civilization appeared, almost suddenly (in comparison to the slow pace of ancient history). The land they controlled offered plentiful game as a summer and winter pasture for migrating flocks. And as they cleared forests and drained flood lands and marshes, the fertility of their land became second to none, producing some of the highest crop yields in antiquity. But it was metallurgical wealth that determined Etruria's development, urbanization and rapid rise to prosperity.

As sailors, warriors and merchants, the Etruscans traded with Greece and its colonies in Sicily and Ionia, Northern Africa, Cyprus and Spain. The Romans called them Tusci or Etrusci, and the Greeks called them Tyrrenol, a name that survives today for the Tyrrenian Sea on the western coast of Italy. Lost in time, the names for their prosperous cities are now known by their Roman names (Tarquinii, Caere, Vulci, Veii and Clusium) or modern Italian names (Arezzo, Cortona, Orvieto, Fiesole and Volterra).

Although the Etruscans were feared some warriors and seafarers, their expansion and power rested on their material and industrial wealth. They mined and processed copper, lead, iron and finished metal products for export. Cities such as Populonia were known for their iron industry, Tarquinii for the production of bronze utensils. The source of economic strength lay in their control of the mineral resources from the Tolfa Hills (west of Lake Bracciano), northward to the Cottins Metallifere (the metal-bearing mountain chain) of Tuscany, where ore deposits of copper, lead, iron and tin were abundant.

The cities that became wealthy from the production of bronze produced some of the finest metalsmiths on the Italian peninsula, who created bronze weapons, candelabra, household utensils, figurines and cauldrons. Iron, however, eclipsed bronze as a bountiful resource. A seemingly inexhaustible supply of ore came primarily from the Island of Elba, off the western coast of Italy. Ancient writers describe the multitude of furnaces that spewed clouds of heavy smoke into the Mediterranean heavens. Experts estimate from the remaining slag heaps on Elba and the coast that the Etruscans extracted and worked from 10,000 to 12,000 tons of iron ore every year for 400 years! In the Etruscan port of Populonia, there are traces of more than 500 mining shafts, together with smelting furnaces, some dating back to 750 B.C.

When the wood used for furnace fuel was gradually depleted, the Etruscans transported the raw ore on barges across the six-mile strait to the city of Populonia. There it could be treated with more efficient furnaces and formed into moderate-sized blocks for export. These blocks, which looked like black sponges, were purchased and transported by merchants, in exchange for money, goods or gold.

Knowledge of the Etruscans' vast wealth, material goods and lifestyle is elusive, but, fortunately, they placed their accumulated wealth of jewelry, household goods and weapons into their tombs for use in Eternity. Most of what we know about the civilization has been learned from such paintings and objects. The acres of cemeteries around Italy's modern cities have helped us reconstruct what the Etruscans were like in life. They were not only a culture of warriors, traders and builders, but an exuberant, sensual people with a passion for the good life.

Residences for the dead have survived much more frequently than those of the living, and many tombs, constructed to last for centuries, have remained intact and undisturbed. Believing that the dead wanted the same comforts as the living, the Etruscans placed objects of earthly life in the tombs. Thus, the contents of the tombs provide a relatively accurate portrayal of Etruscan life. The earliest tombs were covered mounds of earth, and, over a period of 200 years, the structures evolved into short, squat houses where the dead were placed in urns or sarcophagi.

Etruscan Bronze Mirror, 3rd century B.C.
*The back of this mirror is incised with two Dioscuri and two women, encircled by a wreath of leaves, 10 3/4" long. Collection: Merstens-Schaffhausen. Photo: Courtesy The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, MD*
The Etruscans believed that one’s spirit was in danger of a horrible transformation after death, unless a place for the bodily remains was provided. To insure that the spirit retained a human form as it passed beyond the grave, potters and metalworkers were commissioned to produce anthropomorphic urns. The urns vary in form and size but most are decorated with human characteristics, some simple and abstract and others realistic and elaborate.

Gold jewelry, silver, chariots, votive figures and elegant household furnishings filled the tombs of the Etruscan dead. Metal objects made of bronze had a sacred character and ritualistic purpose. The chariots and wagons, for example, used for parades and funerals, were covered with open or pierced ornaments of bronze and iron. They may also have been decorated with figurative panels or decorative motifs formed by repoussé.

Countless small bronze votive figures used for religious dedication also were placed in the tombs. These votive figures represent the worshipper, noble lady, warrior and robed male figure. They were cast with a base or long tangs under the feet so they could be fixed with lead into a wooden or soft sandstone base. The surfaces of the bronzes were carefully polished and finished with delicately incised detail.

The figures themselves have a uniquely Etruscan appearance. Not having the Greek passion for anatomy or classical proportion, the Etruscans made figures with narrow flattened bodies and only a slight suggestion of breasts and buttocks. By exaggerating the facial features, hands and feet, the artist could project expression and personality. While the style of the bronze figures varied from region to region, most, even if in an active pose, retain the long tubular torso, thin, graceful arms and stylized elegance.

Another important type of bronze object found in the burial sites is the incense burner. The most prevalent design resembles a table candelabra with a three-legged base of human figures supporting a central shaft. The decorative dancing and mythological figures symbolize the joys and festivities of life. Many incense burners have repeated motifs, such as lions or plant forms, that were made in molds and then chased and incised with details.

Also used in Etruscan homes were candelabra and oil lamps, the latter a Greek influence. Some floor candelabra are tall, standing almost four-feet high, with a three-legged base supporting a vertical shaft that terminates in horizontal prongs to pierce the candles and hold them upright. Again, cast or chased joyful dancing figures, lions or plant forms usually decorated the central shaft. Burning an oil lamp required constant adjustment of the thick fiber wick through the lamp nozzles. Oil lamps ranged from simple, with one wick, to elaborate, such as the cast bronze Cortona lamp with 16 nozzles. Since the Cortona lamp was designed to hang suspended from the ceiling, the elaborate decoration appears on the underside.

The importance of adornment to the Etruscans is reflected in the sheer quantity and quality of jewelry found in the tombs. Earrings, following the Greek fashion, were large and light. Many of these thin gold earrings were shaped like disks, grape clusters, or barrels decorated with delicate loops and spirals of filigree. Both Etruscan men and women wore pendants, called bullae, designed to hold an amulet. The hollow, lenticular bullae were hung on necklaces or bracelets worn on the upper arm.

As far back as 700 B.C., the gold jewelry found in the tombs was made with a high degree of skill and expertise. Where did this technical virtuosity come from so suddenly? It is difficult to believe that such complex gold jewelry was produced when few, if any, Etruscan gold mines existed. One possible explanation might be that in trading with the Greeks and Phoenicians, gold work passed into Etruria directly or indirectly in exchange for Etruscan iron. In all likelihood, the refined gold jewelry that appears in the Etruscan tombs was designed by Greek or Phoenician craftsmen to satisfy the Etruscan market and artistic taste.

Of all the individual objects found in the Etruscan tombs, the bronze hand mirrors may tell us the most about the culture. The mirrors were engraved with illustrations of Greek myths or scenes of daily life. The engraved characters were labeled with names or identified by costume and symbolic attributes, giving scholars one of the first clues to the Etruscan language and lifestyle.

For Etruscan women, elegance and adornment were symbols of their social status. Unable to acquire such status through political office, the priesthood or war, women considered the material objects they were buried with to be their “insignia” as they traveled into the afterlife. Just as men were buried with the symbols of their authority and achievements (weapons, magistrate’s chairs, etc.) to retain their importance in the afterlife, so, too, a noble woman would want her “insignia” or objects that represented her prestige.

The mirrors, therefore, were cherished possessions and were custom-made or given as gifts. They were not intended for export or trade, but specifically made for an individual in life and buried with her in death. The mirrors were round, flat disks with a hand grip. The front of the mirror
A Metalsmith's Guide
to Etruscan Art in Tuscany

This list offers a brief guide.
The hours of the museums are subject to change;
check before you arrive.

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Aretzo
Archaeological Museum (Museo Archeologico). Open 9 AM - 2 PM (1 PM Sundays and holidays), closed Mondays. Outstanding collection of Etruscan votive bronze figures.

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Cortona
Praetorian Palace (Palazzo Pretorio). Open 10 AM - 1 PM and 4 - 6 PM. The central hall contains Etruscan bronze votive figures and implements. The museum also has an impressive 5C B.C. cast bronze oil lamp surrounded by 16 figures supporting the oil nozzles.

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Florence
Archaeological Museum (Museo Archeologico). Open 9 AM - 2 PM (1 PM Sundays and holidays), closed Mondays. Excellent collection of bronze votive figures, stone urns, iron work, bronze implements and fibulae. In this collection also is the famous bronze sculpture of the Chimera, the beast lion, crouching in an attacking position.

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Orvieto
Museo del Popolo Orvietano. Open 9 AM - 1 PM and 3 PM - 5:30 PM. This museum holds the collection of the Count Faina Family. It contains Etruscan funeral monuments, terracottas, bronzes, jewelry and cosmetic implements. Of special interest is a wheeled bronze brazier dating 6C B.C. and a bronze basket made of twisted wire.

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Perugia
National Archaeological Museum of Umbria (Museo Nazionale Archeologico dell’Umbria). Open 9 AM - 1:30 PM (9 AM - 1 PM Sundays and holidays), closed Mondays. Excellent collection of bronze work, especially bronze fibulae.

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Rome
Vatican Museums. Open 9 AM - 2 PM. In July, August and September, 9 AM - 5 PM, also during Holy and Easter weeks. Etruscan Museum (Museo Gregoriano Etrusco). This collection is of special interest because it contains objects from the Regolini-Galassi Tomb. In the collection are bronze helmets, candelabra, pitchers, urns and gold objects that are spectacular. Especially beautiful is the gold fibula and the raised and embossed bronze cauldron with griffins projecting over the rim.

Museo Nazionale De Villa Giulia. This exquisite collection contains metalwork from southern Etruria (Vulci, Cerveteri, Palestrina, Tarquinia and Veii).

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Volterra
Etruscan Museum (Museo Etrusco Guarnacci). Open April to September, 9 AM - 1 PM and 2:30 PM - 5:30 PM, closed Mondays. Enormous collection of funeral urns.
was finished to a high, reflective polish, while the back was elaborately engraved. Figures and illustrations of the Greek myths were beautifully drawn with flowing contour line and delicate detail. These distinctive objects made especially to honor women remained an Etruscan specialty from the last quarter of the 6th century B.C. to well into the third century B.C.

In sharp contrast to Greek and Roman women, who lived in the shadow of their homes, Etruscan women had a great deal of freedom and status. They attended dances, concerts, sports events, chariot races and acrobatic displays. They participated with men at banquets where they reclined as did the men, on the couches of the triclinium. Such participation in public and private life appeared discreet, and in some ancient writings Etruscan women were described in an unflattering manner. Nevertheless, Etruscan women were held in high regard within their own society, and the strong affection and bond between women and their families is apparent in subject matter chosen for their mirrors.

In death women were honored and had a prominent place. One of the most ancient and luxurious of tombs, the Regolini-Galassi tomb at Caere (650 B.C.), was constructed for a princess. The tomb alcoves contained funerary urns of two warriors surrounded by rich furnishings of silver and bronze. The main funerary chamber, however, designed for a woman, was filled with gold, silver and ivory. Beside the throne remained a bejeweled skeleton of a woman. We only know her name by the inscription engraved on the silver cups and goblets—Larthia.

From the thousands of mirrors that have been found, the most popular style has a round or pear-shaped reflecting surface with an attached handle. The earliest examples in museums no longer have the handles intact, but mirrors produced from later times are complete with ivory, bone or wooden handles.

The method used to make the grip-hand mirror is not fully understood, although recent microscopic metallurgical examinations and surface analysis have added much information. Most of the mirrors are composed of binary (copper-tin) alloys, using a composition of approximately 86% copper and 13% tin. Trace elements of lead, nickel, iron and antimony can be attributed to natural impurities in the ores.

The mirrors were cast as closely as possible to the desired shape. However, there is dispute over what casting method was used. It is possible that they were cast in stone molds, which were used a number of times before breaking from heat shock. Or they may have been cast by the lost-wax method. For the latter, metal smiths may have used stone molds to make the preliminary wax model. Whatever method was used, once cast and removed from the mold, the mirror was annealed and hammered to smooth out imperfections and refine the convex surface.

Final cutting, shaping and finishing may have been done on a lathe. Some mirrors have a "cupule," or small indentation, in the center of the disk. This indentation may have been the pivot for the pointed spindle of the lathe. Concentric circles visible on the reverse side also suggest the use of a lathe. However, some experts feel that the depression on the mirrors is too large to have been made by a lathe and was created, instead, by a tool that kept the disk stationary for engraving. Of course the "cupule" might have been a reference point, as in raising, to measure and insure even hammering. After the mirror was shaped and finished, the engraved decoration was applied. The preliminary drawings on the bronze may have been done in crayon and then the lines cut with a triangular or diamond-shaped burin. Last, the convex surface was polished to a reflective shine with emery and tin oxide and the handle was attached.

Today, when you see an Etruscan mirror in a museum, centuries of corrosion and oxidation make it difficult to perceive the detail of the engraving. Often museums display a line drawing of the engraved image. A restored or conserved mirror has been carefully cleaned and the bronze deterioration has been halted by chemical treatments. Incised lines are filled with white drawing ink and the pits filled with tinted microcrystalline wax. The conservation improves the appearance, adds clarity to the detail and protects the mirror, but one must still use imagination to see how striking the mirror must have been when new.

In looking at the wide range of subjects engraved on the Etruscan mirrors, the Etruscan character and vitality become apparent. Many mirrors have written dedications or the owner's name. One such translation from a fourth-century mirror is inscribed "Titus Calus gave this mirror to his mother as a gift." Mirrors might be inscribed with their owners names, much as we do today with monograms and initials on silverware. For example, one mirror reads, "I am the mirror of Larthia Puruhena."

In contrast to the Greek inclination for simplification and idealization, the Etruscans preferred everyday occurrences. The engraver-artist could emphasize the client's wealth by including details of jewelry, luxurious clothes, furniture and accessories. There are a wide variety of scenes showing men and women dressing, adorning themselves, attending banquets or
Etruscan Bronze Mirror, about 300 B.C.
The back of this hand mirror is engraved with a scene of Hermes and Paris, 10 1/4" h. x 5 3/4" d.
Photo: Courtesy North Carolina Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Hanes

being waited upon by servants. Frequently, the subjects were intimate and private, showing scenes of their personal life. A husband and wife might be shown at banquet or a well-dressed couple might be depicted standing in their bedroom. Romantic and sensual themes include embracing lovers, bathers and dancers. Women often chose literary themes from Greek mythology that reflected the importance of women as nurturers. Scenes with children, births, nurturing infants and family "gatherings" are lovingly handled and display the importance of the family unit.

The majority of the Etruscan mirrors, however, use Greek mythological stories. The preference for Greek themes above their own mythology is a puzzle. The range in subjects show that the Etruscans possessed a sophisticated knowledge of literary and artistic Greek tradition. The choice of Greek themes simply may have been the belief that the Greek culture was the best the world had to offer. However, one must not dismiss the Etruscan culture as a mere variant of Greek civilization. For all their "borrowing" and purchasing of Greek culture, the Etruscans maintained a strikingly independent approach in their art, achieving something unique. Uninterested in classical principles, they emphasized capturing the instant or spirit of the moment rather than any permanent, philosophical truth.

Etruscan metalwork is characterized by an energy and intensity. Their economy, based on metal industry and trade, extended their influence throughout the ancient world. And although the record of their artistic and technical achievements does not exist in ancient books, the history of Etruscan metallsmithing has been left to us in the objects themselves.

Note: I would like to offer my appreciation to the University of Georgia, Studies Abroad Program and to Gary Noffke for help and support. As a result of my travels in Italy with the Cortona Program, a brief guide to Etruscan metalwork collections appears with this article.

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