

COMPARISON OF MYTHOLOGICAL AND NON-MYTHOLOGICAL ICONOGRAPHY
DISPLAYED ON ETRUSCAN POTTERY

by

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When we think of Ancient cultures the ones that come to mind are Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Mesopotamia but Etruria or commonly referred to as the Etruscans is frequently not included. This could be due to its assimilation by the Romans. The Etruscan nation was not only the predasecors to the Romans in the Italian peninsula but much like the Romans they created trade networks that reached as far as the ancient cities of Carthage and Athens. The presence of these trading networks with the Greek City States can be seen through the number of ceramic vessels found in tombs along the southern portion of the peninsula. The interesting aspect of these vessels is the images or iconography being displayed not only on the Greek pottery but on Etruscan ceramics as well. This study explores the nature of the scenes imitated by the Etruscans on their own pottery as a result of their interactions with their Greek neighbors.

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INTRODUCTION

Archaeologists interpret artifacts in many different ways. They can be an innovated development in technology or a subtle change in the design to improve the function of the object. An artifact usually is man made or altered by man in order to create something new. One type of artifact is known as ceramics. Ceramics are constructed using clay often mixed with sand, shell, or rock fragments. After mixing these materials, an individual could make a number of pottery vessels, figurines, and other items. Archaeologists typically find sherds of pottery vessels rather than whole vessels. A sherd is a portion of a larger vessel. The sherd itself can range in size from the size of a small rock to a complete side of a vessel. Because of the great number of variations found in ceramics they can often be used for distinguishing one period from another based on changes in their decoration, shape, style and the type of materials used. But when analyzing them one might have questions about the shreds, such as; why did the ceramist choose this particular temper? Is there a reason for the shape of the vessel? Is there a function behind the choices? Does the pot have decoration? If not, then why not? If so, then what is the meaning behind the decoration on the pot?

Since the early nineteenth century, ceramics with distinctly Greek “traits” have been found at archaeological sites in Italy, particularly those of both habitation and funerary nature associated with the Etruscan culture. Earlier theories suggested that they were actually Greek ceramics that had just been imported. However, this has been shown to be a false assumption. Material analysis conducted on the vessels shows that they were manufactured using local raw

materials, not materials found in Greece. The question is why are there locally produced ceramics painted with depictions of Greek myths and scenes of everyday Greek life? This study examines assemblages of Etruscan artifacts found at four different sites in the Italian peninsula. Data on these artifacts was previously compiled by Robin Osborne (2001) and focuses on the relative abundance of various elements of iconography or the images displayed on the surface of the pottery vessels. Iconography can be pictures, designs, or geometric shapes displayed on pottery. I will be specifically focusing on which specific types of iconography are most prevalent on the Etruscan materials; those depicting scenes of everyday life, or those depicting mythological events.

BACKGROUND

The culture referred to as the Etruscans occupied the southwestern part of the Italian peninsula. The peninsula is composed of three major topographical provinces from the western to the eastern border: the anti-Apennines, the pre-Apennines, and the Apennines Mountains. The anti-Apennines lie near the western border and extend until what is now as modern day Rome and Florence following along the Tiber valley until it crosses over the Val di Chiana and joins the Arno valley at Arezzo (Baker and Rasmussen 1998). Banti suggests that we can use historical texts along with archaeological data to map out the boundaries of the former Etruscan nation. From this data, their boundaries ranged to the north to the bank of the Arno River, the Ombrone River and the southern hills of the Apennines Mountains situated north of Pistoia, and to the south to the Tiber River, to the west to the Tyrrhenian Sea (Banti 1973). Complications arise when looking for the eastern boundaries because until the end of the sixth century B.C. they did

not cross the Apennines Mountains. However, after the start of the fifth century B.C., they appeared to have moved past Lake Trasimene as seen in Figure 1.

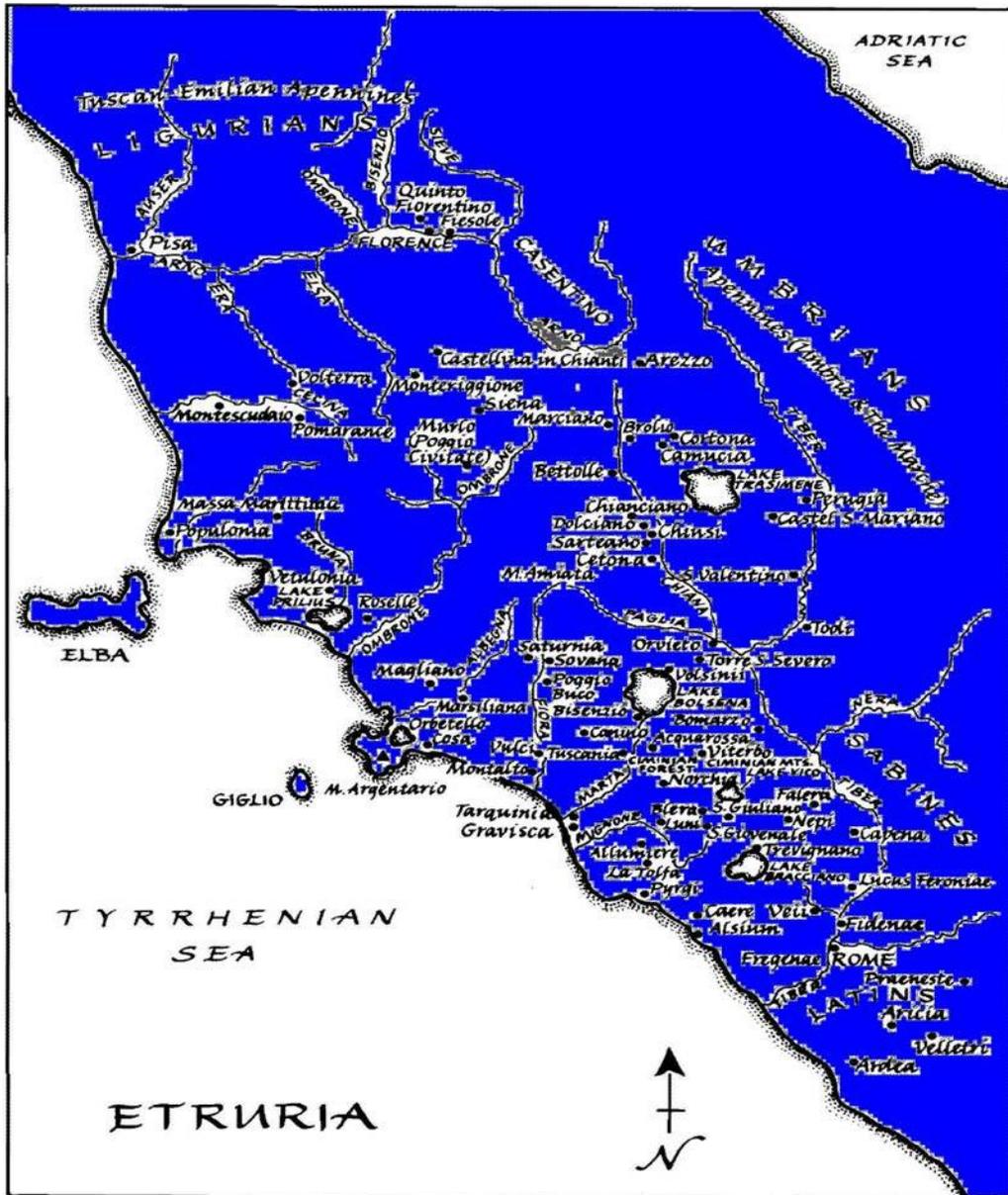


Figure 1: Map of Etruria and its Boundaries (changed after Bonfante 1986)

Toward the southern boundaries of Etruria are the colonies from Greece and Phoenician areas. The reason we know there was a connection is from material remains excavated from both Greek and Etruscan cities, historical text and established trade routes. On figure 2, you can see a number of Greek and Phoenician colonies along the coastal areas of the Italian peninsula. The red dots represent colonies that were established by Greece where the green dots represent ones established by Phoenician travelers. As you can see a majority of the colonies are along the southern and western boarder of the peninsula with the exception of colonies being established on Corsi and Sardi as well as a single colony in the northern portion of Italy. The blue marks on the map represent principal native areas. As you can see even though there was a large majority of the country established toward the north there is a strong possibility of established trade routes with the southern area.



Figure 2: Map of Etruria and Greek/Phoenician Colonies (after Bonfante 1986).

Unlike the geographic boundaries of the Etruscan nation the origin of this group of people has been a little more difficult to determine. The origin of the Etruscan culture has been difficult to uncover due to the numerous theories suggested by ancient historians and modern ones. The historian Herodotus suggested that the Etruscans were originally from an area called Lydia now in the modern Turkish provenance of Manisa. Due to famine, their king divided his people into two groups where one being lead by his son would leave the area to find a new area to settle in where the other group would remain behind. The second group eventually settled in Umbrian territory (Banti 1973). Herodotus's theory was that the Etruscans or the Tyrrhenians/Lyidian as

he referred to them might have been involved in the Trojan War suggesting that their migration happened after the war was over. He suggests that they were skilled metal workers, introduced retail trade, and were said to have invented the games that were often played by the Greeks to demonstrate how adapt men and young boys were.

“These games are supposed to have been invented at the time when they sent a colony to settle in Tyrrhenia, and that story is that in the reign of Atys, the son of Manes, the whole of Lydia suffered from a severe famine. For a time the people lingered on as patiently as they could, but later, when there was no improvement, they began to look for something to alleviate their misery. Various expedients were devised: for instance, the invention of the dice, knucklebones, and ball-games” (Histories 1.94).

He later goes on to say that they survived for eighteen more years until the king decided to intervene.

“So the King divided the population into two groups and determined by drawing lots which should emigrate and which should remain at home. He appointed himself to rule the section whose lot determined that they should remain, and his son Tyrrhenus to command the emigrants. The lots were drawn, and one section went down to the coast at Smyrna, where they built vessels, put aboard all their household effects and sailed in search of a livelihood elsewhere. They passed many countries and finally reached Umbria in the north of Italy, where they settled and still live to this day” (Histories 1.94).

Dionysius of Halicarnassus’s tale shares some of the same characteristics of with the exception of them already being an established group. The issue with his theory is that Dionysius used numerous opinions, merged them together, and with a little adjustment created his own opinion (Pallonttin 1975).

“The Romans, however, give them other names: from the country they once inhabited, named Etruria, they call them Etruscans, and from their knowledge of the ceremonies relating to divine worship, in which they excel others, they now call them, rather inaccurately, Tusci, but formerly, with the same accuracy as the Greeks, they called them Thyoscoï. Their own name for themselves, however, is the same as that of one of their leaders, Rasenna” (Roman Antiquities 1.30.3).

During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the discussion reemerged due to archaeological, linguistic, and textual evidence. A more modern theory comes from Freret, who

assumed that the Etruscans migrated into Italy through the Alpine pass but he also rejected Herodotus's theory of the Etruscans traveling to the area through the Asia Minor.

“These scholars accepted mainly the negative aspect of his criticism and, argued from the analogy of the name Rasenna (which Disonysius had attributed to the Etruscans) with that of the Alpine Reatians, imagined that the Etruscans had originally descended from the Alps into central Italy” (Pallonttin 1975).

Etruria was comprised of twelve nations subdivided into two regions, the North and the South. While similar in many respects, the two regions do have differences in cultural practices. While I am not going to pay particular attention to specific cities some of them are important when it concerns Etruscan history. Much like the Romans, the Etruscans expanded their borders outward from the end of the seventh century to the middle of the fifth century B.C. they had control of other areas of Italy (Banti 1973). The area was divided into a northern and southern board as well as two distinct periods known as the Villanovan and Orientalizing Periods. The Villanovan period was recognized and noted due to studying of cemeteries. Archaeologist noted that the society appeared to be fairly egalitarian with its social structure in regards to gender orientated tasks.

“The grave gifts deposited alongside cremation urns are quite poor, and reflect social distribution: men were warriors, and women were the custodians of the house and spinners. Soon, however, this relative financial equality between individuals disappeared” (Torelli 1986).

However, during the second phase of this period we seen some groups rising within the social structure by displaying their wealth with metal objects such as armor, arms and other things that were used daily along with ceramics that were believed to have been imported from Greek influenced areas as well as evidence of trade with Sardinia and the other Eastern provenances. While social and economic divisions became more defined the Greeks had started to colonize the southern coastline of Italy in the city known as Pithekoussai. The city was fairly close to Etruria

and with imports coming from Greece and other areas the influence appeared to have trade with the Greeks. Because of this close proximity, colonies were established along the southern portion of Italy to facilitate trade with the Greeks across the Adriatic Sea (Bloch 1963). That it was easier to trade with the neighboring islands thus blending the two cultures into what we assume to be typical Etruscan. It is suggested by Torelli that this may have separated the classes further. He believes that this can be seen in the objects placed in tombs of higher class individuals (Torelli 1986).

This increase in wealth in the southern region of the country appears to continue well into the Orientalizing period of the seventh century B.C.

“The Orientalizing style of art had its beginning in Greece, stimulated by frequent contact with the cultures of the East: Lydia, Urartu, Syria, Palestine, Assyria, and Egypt. In Etruria this composite, eclectic style acquired an even more luxuriant character, in accord with the provincial, marginal character of the area, but this style also expressed the love of luxury, the boldness and the enterprising spirit of the Etruscan aristocracy” (Torelli 1986).

These changes in art can be seen in the change in burial practices of the period. The tombs appear to be set on higher land forms or under large mounds so they could reproduce homes of the period. Other changes are the incorporation of the Greek funerary banquet as well as the adoption of writing that appears to be a form of the Chalcidian Greek alphabet further separating the northern region from the southern. The process of burying the dead is rather distinct in the south compared to the north. In the north they relied on cremation rather than entombing their dead like in the south. Bloch suggests that this particular rite was not done through necessity rather it was a process of other groups such as the Greeks migrating into the area (Bloch 1969).

In these tombs, archaeologists found a wide assemblage of artifacts that include ceramics and non-ceramic items. Some scholars classify them as terracotta because they were constructed out of clay, but for the purpose of this paper, I will refer to them as ceramics. The interesting

thing is that they appear to be Greek in origin, leading scholars to believe that they were originally imports from the Greek colonies in the area. This idea could have developed because of a number of cities in the area took on Greek-like styles for their architecture, art and even their myths. Archaeologists found evidence of Etruscan ceramics displaying very Greek-like iconography.

Pottery can be used for more than just its function. It can also be used as a social aspect such as demonstrating economic and social hierarchy. For the Etruscans it appears to be a means of trade with other nations as well as a marker of social hierarchy. But one has to note that not only Greek or Etruscan pottery was found in southern tombs rather it was a mixture of both. Greek ceramics of the period can be divided into the two larger groupings of black-figure and red-figure pottery. Figure 3 displays not only the black figure pottery style common of Greek ceramists but it also displays Hercules and his travels.

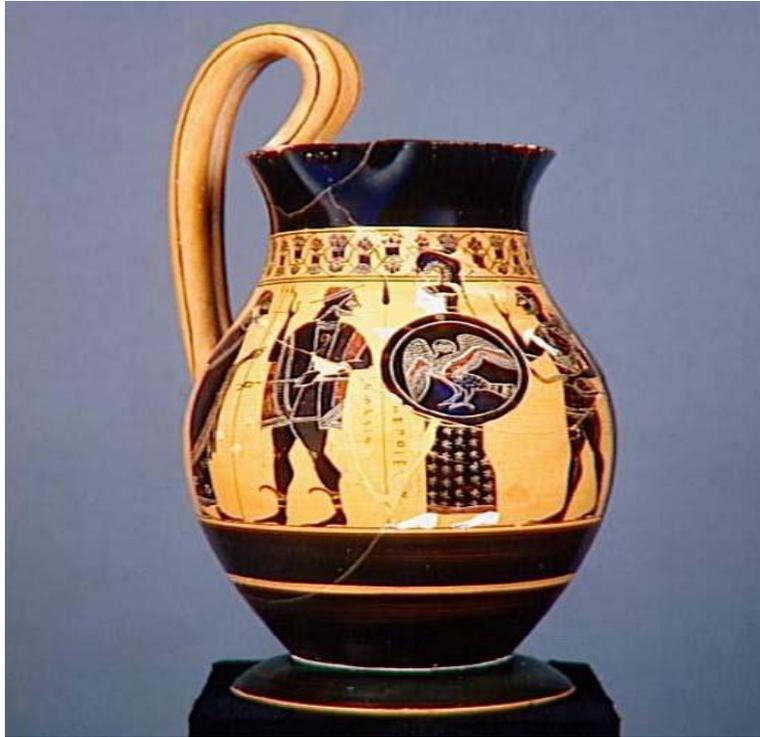


Figure 3: An Athenian Ceramic with Hercules depicted in the black-figure style (Louvre Museum 2011:F30).

The pottery style can be further subdivided into groups based on various characteristics such as style, shape, and decoration. Black-figured pottery is when the artist paints on a red colored pot with black pigment showing the red underneath. The same process is repeated with the red-figure style but instead of black-on-red, it is red-on-black. These ceramics often have two types of iconography, namely mythical figures/scenes and scenes of daily life. From the southern area of Etruria, we find evidence of both black- and red-figure Greek pottery with along with native made Etruscan black- and red-figure pottery.

But to suggest a harmonious relationship between the Greeks and Etruscans is untrue as it appears that both the Greeks and the Etruscan took part in piracy while fighting in various wars. An example of this can be seen in Herodotus's *Histories* book six where we can see some of the issues the Etruscans or the Tyrrhenians as he calls them have with their neighbors. In the book

he talks about the fight between Greece and the Persians who were invading Phocaea. The only mention of the Etruscans is in reference to piracy done by the Phocaeen commander Dionysius.

“He did not, however, make for Phocaea, because he knew his people would share the fate of all the other Ionians and be reduced to slavery; instead he set his course, without further preparation, straight for Phoenicia, where he sank a number of cargo-vessels and took from them property of considerable value; he then sailed for Sicily, which he made his base for piratical raids against Carthaginian and Tyrrhenian shipping-Greek ships he never molested” (Histories 6.17).

This as well as the continued expansion from Rome seems to have lead to their downfall as an independent nation. While they were expanding they encountered what we later would term the central city of the Roman Empire, Rome. At first things appeared to fairly balance between the two nations until Rome began to expand outward. After several social wars between the Etruscans were the Romans able to come in and conquer a few cities. The end finally came during 500 B.C., when they were assimilated into Roman culture.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study consists of four processes. The first three will be accomplished primarily through library resources. I will be looking into the Etruscan culture pottery as a whole based on the compilation published by Robin Osborne (2001). I will also be noting whether the vessels were constructed in Etruria or imported into Etruria from Greek colonies. If the vessels or other artifacts were imported from an outside source, why were they importing rather than manufacturing themselves? Moreover, when did this exchange end and why? I will also be explaining the sudden disappearance of the Etruscan culture until it was rediscovered.

Other resources I will be looking at are Greek myths in relation to my results. Why the Etruscans were using specific myths over others and why they are displaying certain life

depictions. I will also explain why it appeared to be important for the display of myths on pottery versus other artifacts. Then I will be including what myths appear to be in favor in regards to Osborne's compiled assemblage and how they were eventually intergraded into Etruscan culture. Osborne suggests that there was an established trade route with both Italy and Greek colonies well before Alexander the Great and the Roman Empire (Osborne 2001).

DATA

Using data provided in Osborne (2001) I compiled data on both the mythical and life scenes in an attempt to determine if one type of scene had a greater frequency of occurrence than the other. Unfortunately, in his study Osborne does not present raw count data for the occurrences of particular scenes. Rather, he using a graded categorical system of recording with the following categories: present (2-5), abundant (>5), absent (0) and single occurrence (1). In order to examine the relative frequency of the occurrences of different types of scenes, it was necessary to assign some numerical equivalencies to these categories. Therefore, when compiling the data, I assigned a value of one to Osborne's single occurrence, 3.5 to present, 6 to abundant, and 0 to absent. By doing so, it made it possible to create graphs depicting the occurrence rates of certain scene types while allowed for visual comparisons to be made.

With the database for both life scenes and mythological scenes completed the initial find was that there was a higher frequency of mythological images than life scenes. The first database indicates the total value of five different black-figure and red-figure Athenian ceramics styles; the Agora, Vulci, Tarquinia, Bologna and Nola. After find the values for the Athenian pottery I went back and found the total values for the four different Etruscan ceramics styles: Etruscan

black-figured, Etruscan red-figured, Etruscan superposed, and Caeretan Hydriai. This was reproduced for the life scenes assemblage as well as the complete assemblage.

Starting with fairly simple graphs I noticed that even though there showed some distinct variations there was still some issues in trying to interrupt the data. Going back into my complete assemblage databases I broke down the two iconography styles into smaller groups. The life scenes were separated into individual and group activities. The mythological scenes were separated into three categories; gods or goddess depictions, creature depictions and finally hero depictions. Noticing that there would be several scenes that have or more of the different choices I focused on the number of times the image was represented within the Etruscan ceramic material culture more so than the Athenian ceramic material culture. This is a sample of my database for mythological and life scenes as seen in table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of the occurrences of various deities on both Greek and Etruscan pottery.

Mythological Deities	Greek Pottery	Etruscan Pottery
Akamas and Demophon	10.5	0
Aphrodite	8	4.5
Apollo	38	3.5
Artemis	11.5	1
Athena	34.5	1
Dionysos	50	7
Dionysos and Ariadne	10.5	3.5
Eos and Kephalos/Tithonos	7	1
Eros	16.5	7
Hercules	196.5	25
Hermes	21	3
Nike	27	4.5
Perseus	14.5	2
Zeus	11.5	1

The problem with looking at only the frequency of a single category is the exclusion of the other iconography. Understanding that there will be a greater frequency of Greek pottery due to the sample size provided I decided to go back and put the categories back together and look at it as whole rather than individual parts. It has to be noted that the Etruscan pottery samples were found within a funerary context where the Greek pottery samples were from non-funerary contexts (Osborne 2001).

ANAYLSIS

Looking at the data after it was group according to either Greek or Etruscan pottery samples presented different and easier to understand results.

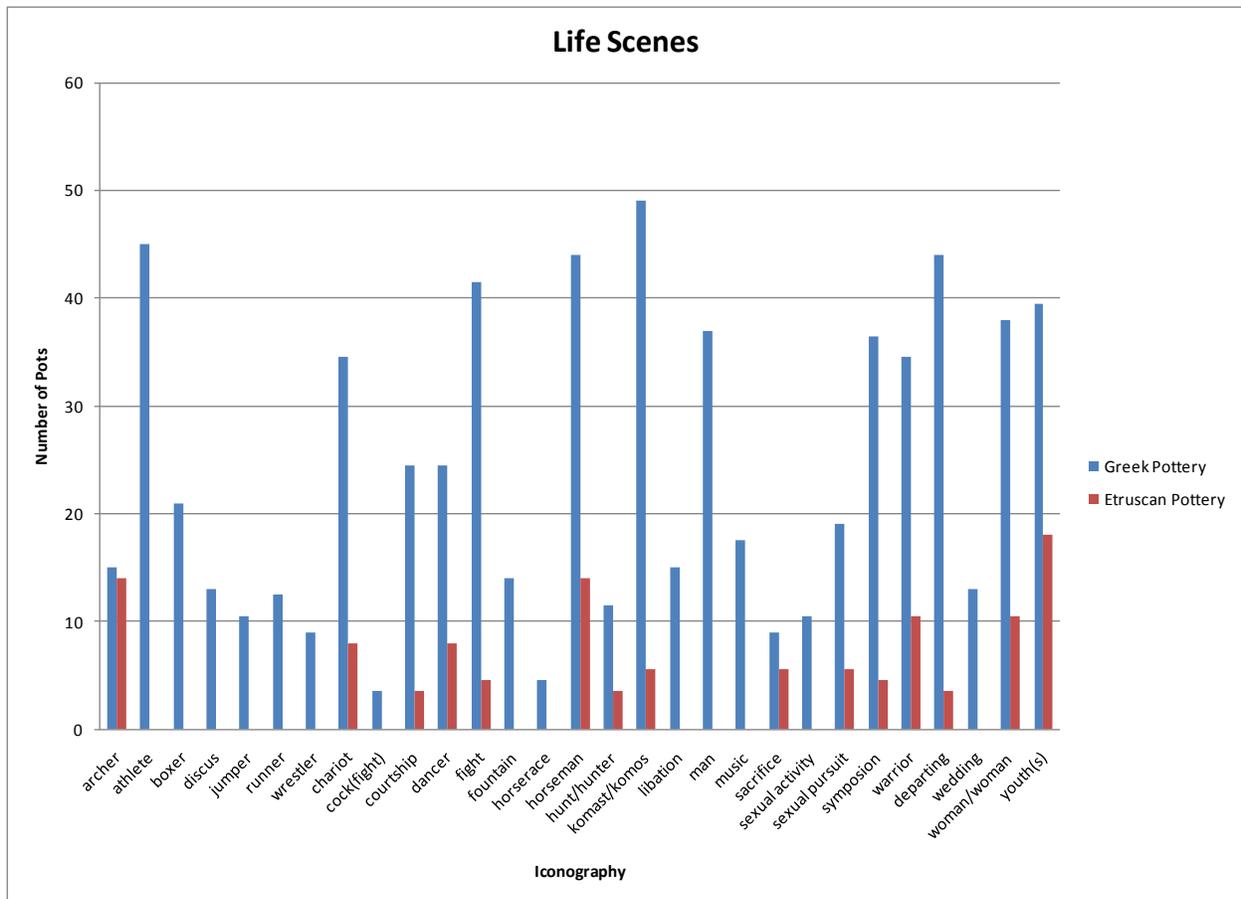


Figure 4: Graph displaying the frequency of Life Scenes among Greek and Etruscan Pottery

At first glance there appears to be a significant difference between Greek and Etruscan Pottery that displays life scenes but if you notice that seven out of the twenty eight images being displayed have more than 4.5 chances at being reproduced. These seven are the archer, chariot, dancer, fight, horseman, komast/komos, sacrifice, sexual pursuit, symposium, warrior, woman and youth(s). Compared to their Greek pottery counterparts there is obviously less in number as seen in table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of occurrences of various life scenes on Greek and Etruscan Pottery

Life Scenes	Greek Pottery	Etruscan Pottery
Archer	15	14
Chariot	34.5	8
Dancer	24.5	8
Fight	41.5	4.5
Horseman	44	14
Komast/komos	49	5.5
Sacrifice	9	5.5
Sexual pursuit	19	5.5
Symposion	36.5	4.5
Warrior	34.5	10.5
Woman	38	10.5
Youth(s)	29.5	18

As mentioned earlier there is a significant difference between the two frequencies of availability it is interesting that a few of the samples are within a few numbers of each other. The depictions of the archer and sacrifice as example only have 1 to 3.5 differences between each other. The other seventeen depictions range from no representation to 3.5. The ones that do have representation less than 4.5 are courtship, hunt/hunter, and departing iconography.

Comparing the life scenes to mythological scenes, there appears to be a larger quantity of mythological scenes being reproduced as suggested by table 1's frequency of deities among the two pottery samples as seen in figure 5.

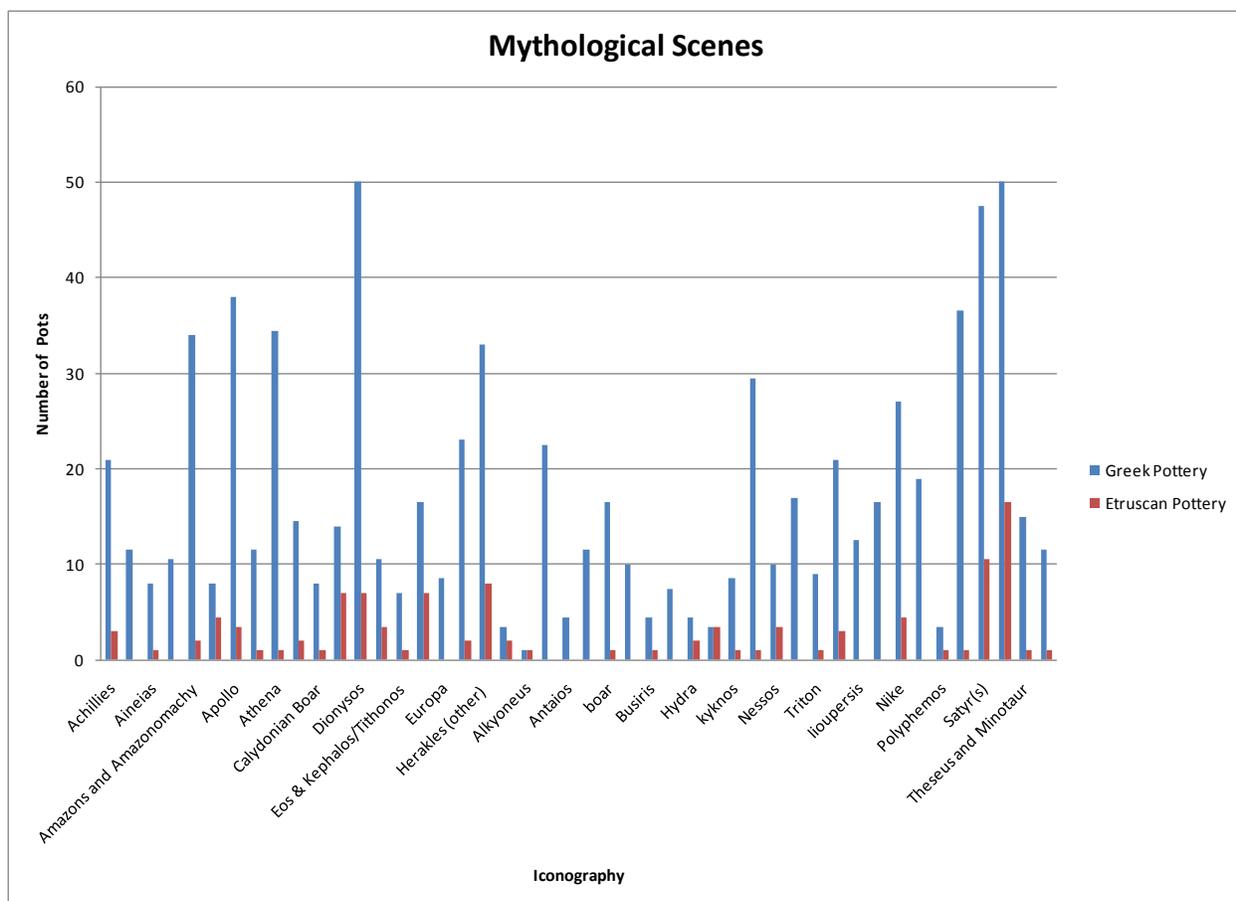


Figure 5. Graph displaying the frequency of occurrence among mythological scenes on Greek and Etruscan pottery.

Initially looking at the graph you can see a wide variety of images being displayed with a large number of sherds showcasing either gods/goddess, mythological creatures by themselves or with Hercules. The surprising thing was the number of gods/goddess that was depicted within the Etruscan pottery assemblage: Aphrodite, Dionysos, Eros, Hercules, and Nike. In figure 6 you can see that these five images have a higher frequency of occurrence than other gods/goddesses but what about other mythological scenes.

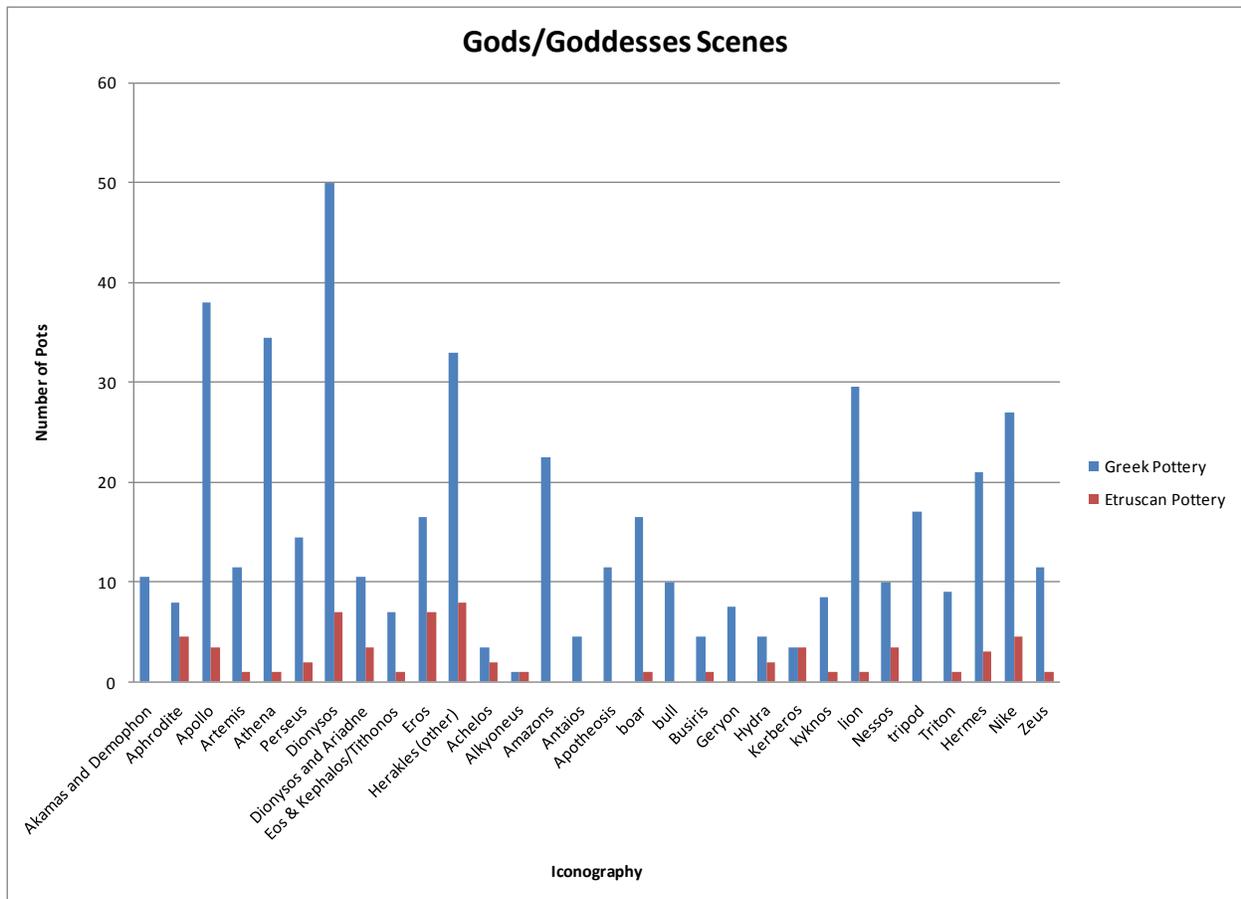


Figure 6. Frequency of Gods/Goddesses being displayed on Greek and Etruscan Pottery

Compared this to table 3 you can see that of twenty four groups of mythological creatures four of them have a frequency higher than seven found among Etruscan pottery but to keep in mind is the overlapping of Hercules iconography.

Table 3. Frequency of occurrence of mythological creatures displayed on Greek and Etruscan Pottery

Mythological Creatures	Greek Pottery	Etruscan Pottery
Centaur(omarchy)	14	7
Heracles (other)	33	8
Satyr(s)	47.5	10.5
Satyrs and Maenads	50	16.5

However when we look at mythological scenes that depict heroes you would expect Hercules to be one of the larger sample sizes within the Etruscan pottery assemblage because of the number of times he appears in the other two samples. This is true but his iconography is the only one being depicted in greater numbers. The only other hero that has a high frequency is Achilles but even then his number is lower than Hercules by five sherds as seen in figure 7.

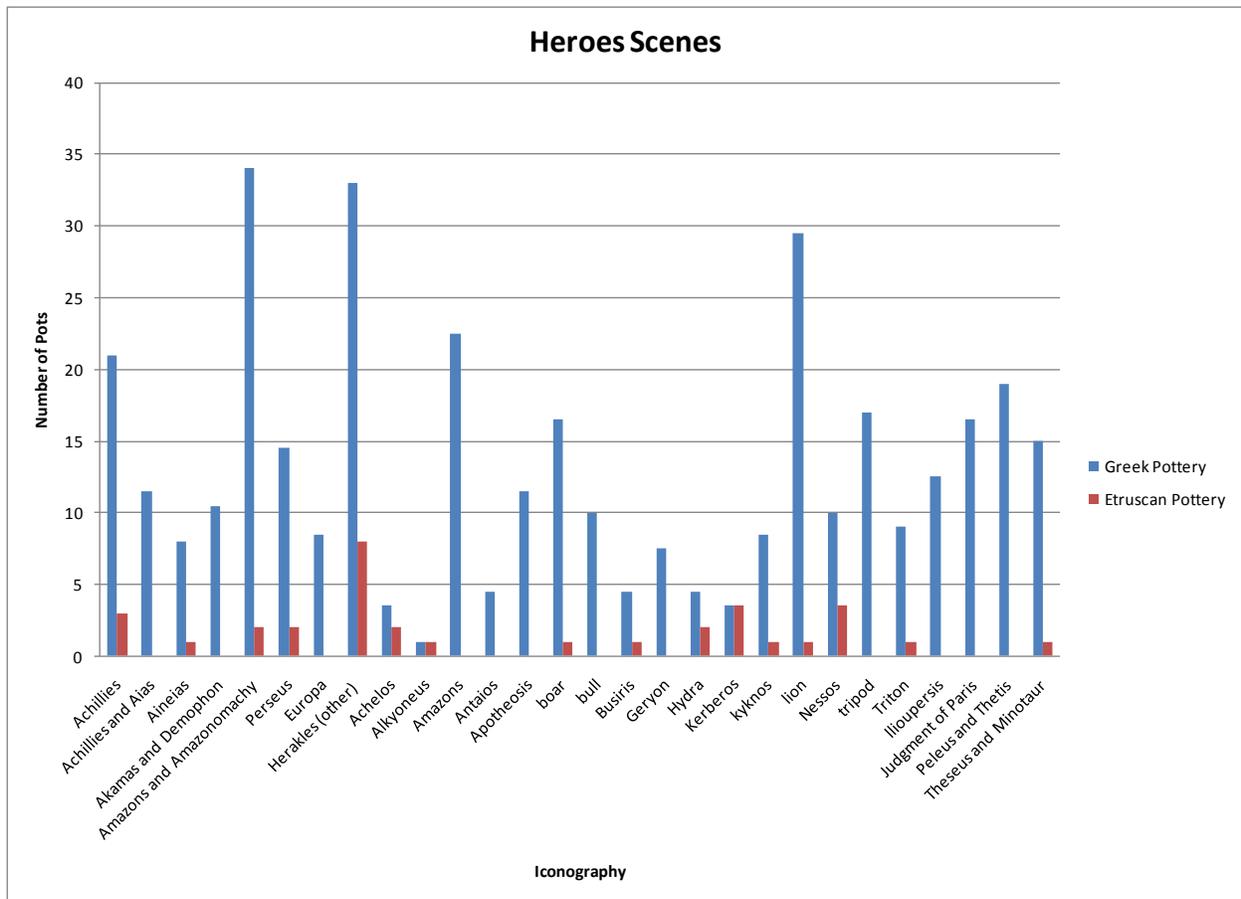


Figure 7. Graph of the frequency of Hero iconography displayed on Greek and Etruscan Pottery

CONCLUSION

But which iconography style is more sought after for the Etruscan? Looking at the assemblage and the close proximity of Greek colonies to the Etruscan nation there is no doubt that was some type of influence occurring in the south but from the evidence I believe that even with this influence the Etruscans primary use for these specific scenes can be found where they were discovered, within funerary tombs. T. B. L. Webster’s *Potter and Patron in Classical Athens* as well as The Beazley Archive, I wanted to find out why the Etruscans are gathering specific mythological scenes over others and why they are important.

Alexander Carpino suggested that the Etruscan mainly had a decedent understanding of Greek mythology but would often change or add things that were important to their culture. Some of these changes can be found on reliefs being displayed on mirrors. Other suggestions are that vase painters departed from traditional methods in regards to depicting mythological scenes and made them more humanistic even a way to reflect the importance of family (Hall 1996).

That's all well and good for reliefs on mirrors and tomb walls but does this change or addition to mythological scenes include pottery as well. Much like the Romans, the Etruscans appeared to have assimilated some of the Greek religious tradition into their own culture. Like the Greeks they began to displayed mythological tradition on more a humanistic side rather than a poetic tradition.

“During the Archaic period, under Greek impact, human representations moved into the focus of attention as the most worthwhile subject of art, but even then their purpose cannot always have been the same as in Greece. The mythical foundation was missing. It is a telling symptom of the difference between Etruscan and Greek conditions that down to the middle of the sixth century not one Etruscan representation can be with certainty identified as an image of city” (Brendel 1995).

That being said it seems the importance of mythological images was just a way to add a more humanistic feeling to not only the adaption of Greek gods into the Etruscan religion but also a way to humanism the existing parathion. Not only did they include Greek Gods into their religion but the adaptation of Greek vase painting occurred during the fifth century. It was displayed both on pottery, reliefs and tomb walls found in the south were a majority of Greek colonies were established. This shows a need for artisans to be trained in the Greek style to produce various works of art (Brendel 1995).

Looking at the seven highest categories in life scenes; archer, chariot, dancer, fight, horseman, komast/komos, sacrifice, sexual pursuit, symposion, warrior, woman and youth(s) and

then looking at Webster and the Beazley achieve I noticed that the seven groups could be divided into four to seven groups based on who is analyzing the image but you have to keep in mind that a majority of the pottery they are looking at is Greek and not Etruscan. Even though we can see the importance of some of these images within a merging culture of Etruscan and Greek. For komos it is extremely difficult to tell it from symposion because they look very similar.

“The typical symposion scene shows one or more figures reclining on a couch. It is difficult to draw a clear line between the symposion itself with entertainers present and the succeeding komos when the revelers danced and sang on their way home to intrude into another symposion” (Webster 1972).

Horsemen and chariots in general appear to be a rather important thing in ancient time but what was interesting is that in Webster’s books he notes that Etruria’s distribution of horsemen and chariot images are 89 black-figures and 93 red-figures (Webster 1972). But what caught my interest is the number of woman or women being showcased on Etruscan pottery. The distribution of woman from my data and the data that Webster presents is interesting. He suggests that by the late fifth century that Greece and its islands had at least 15 depictions of women were Etruria had 74. Comparing that to my data in table 2 is confusing because it is switched around however it shows that there is a significant difference between how both groups look at their female counterparts.

In my data you can notice there is a large range of mythological iconography with a majority of it focusing on Hercules and his journeys but they do not reach the same frequency of reoccurrence as some of the life scenes do. Suggesting that even through Greek mythological scenes were important they were not as important as some of the life scenes as you can see from table 2 and figure 5. The possibility for having a higher frequency among life scenes could be the need to reinforce the idea of family as suggested by Carpino or model them self after the

Greeks however to me it shows that there was a greater need to showcase the mundane and everyday occurrences more than the mythical ones.

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Louvre Museum

2011 Online catalogue of the Louve Museum.

http://www.louvre.fr/llv/oeuvres/liste_departements.jsp?bmLocale=en.