



The Tomb of the Bulls

of OLIVER STORGAARD-HALLSSON

The Tomb of the Bulls in Tarquinia has been subject to many different interpretations throughout time. I will describe some of the different interpretations here and try to compare them to each other. Finally I will give a brief summary and reach a conclusion.

The Tomb of the Bulls is decorated with several paintings. On one wall there is a large central painting between two doorways. The painting shows an armed man on foot. To his right is a large construction, seemingly made of stone or bricks, with two animal figures on top of it. Next comes what looks like a small fountain. In the middle of the painting is a tall plant with a flower on top of a stem and a bud or fruit hanging on either side. Then we see a horse with a rider on its back. Directly beneath the horse is a crude red lump with what looks like beams or tentacles shooting out from it. Below is a sequence of trees, some with leaves and some without. There is a doorway on either side of the central painting, and on the sides of each doorway is a painted tree.

Above the central painting is a long frieze running across the whole wall. From left to right there is a bull lying down and a group of three people copulating. Two of them are dark-skinned and one is pale. In the middle of the frieze is a line of Etruscan letters saying: "Arath Spuriana", which has been identified as a name - maybe of the owner of the tomb (Pfiffig 1972, 28-29, no. 11).

To the right of the inscription is another scene with a bull and a



Fig. 1: The large central painting

group of two people copulating. This time the bull is not an ordinary bull, but instead it is an Acheloos as it has the face of a man. It is seemingly charging towards the group of people. Both persons are dark-skinned but the one to the right has slightly darker skin than the one to the left. Both persons look like men, but you can only see the penis of the one to the right.

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Above this frieze is a triangular painting. From left to right there is a sphinx and a chimaera. The frieze is divided in the middle by a big brown “box” with volutes and on the right side of that is a horse with a rider on it and a bovine to the right of the horseman.

Finally, directly opposite this wall is the doorway to the dromos with paintings above the door. Directly under the ceiling to the left is a scene portraying water and a small island. To the left is a sea creature shaped like a dog with a fishtail and a small bird flying above the water surface. To the right of that is another sea creature shaped like a horse with a fishtail. But the last fish-horse, or hippocampus, has a rider on it and he is heading for the small island.

The tomb has been dated to around the middle of the 6th century BC, 540 BC, by R. Leighton (Leighton 2004, 118). Some places we see clear signs of Archaic style, but what I would really like to discuss is not how the tomb has been dated but rather how it has been interpreted.

To do this I will begin with the central painting of the armed person on foot and the rider. It is generally accepted that this scene depicts Achilles ambushing Troilos, a scene taken from the *Kypria* (Oleson 1975, 191). Furthermore the scene has more or less been used to interpret the other paintings in the tomb.

J. P. Oleson published an article in 1975 about The Tomb of the Bulls in Tarquinia in *AJA*. He starts by discussing whether the painting is just a copy of a Greek vase painting, which could mean that the artist who painted it in the Etruscan tomb had no idea of the story behind the scene. Or if the artist knew the literate background of the story and then painted it from what he knew about the story. Oleson is convinced that the Etruscan artist behind this painting must have been familiar with the story and the symbolic significance of the event (Oleson 1975, 191). To prove this he uses the object on the painting, beneath the horseman, who in this case would be Troilos, which I described as: “...[a] crude red lump with what looks like beams or tentacles shooting out from it.”. Oleson states that this object only makes sense if it is interpreted as the evening sun (Oleson 1975, 193). This sun is then a symbol of Apollo at whose altar Troilos was murdered by Achilles, which brought down Apollo’s wrath. Oleson makes clear that the Etruscan sun god is Usil (Enking 1961, 1084-85; Herbig 1965, 3), but in both Etruscan and Greek art the conflation of Usil/Helios and Apulu/Apollo is both early and continuous (Oleson 1975, 195). On several other depictions of the sun god in Etruscan art, on the other hand, the god is anthropomorphic. Oleson claims that this can be explained by the difference in scale in the painting, thus the personification of a Helios/Apollo would simply have been out of place. A simple cosmic image of the god is appropriate to the Etruscan religious beliefs (Oleson 1975, 196).

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Besides being connected to the Troilos story, as Apollo, the setting sun is related to the symbolism of death and dying. As the sun sets a man dies. This goes well with the extreme celestial interpretation of Etruscan religion; this is the principle of universal cosmic sympathy on which the Etruscan science of hepatoscopy was founded. This Oleson uses to interpret other symbols in the tomb. The trees underneath the Troilos scene can symbolize the turning cycle of the seasons as a parallel to the cycle of life and death.

To further prove that this is about Apollo/Helios and the sun Oleson mentions that in the Iliad, and elsewhere in Greek myth, both Apollo and Helios are connected with the supervision of the dead. And Helios saw the whole face of the earth at day and then at night he passed beneath it, which implies close connections to the underworld, and in many contexts Helios is holding the keys to the gates the underworld (Oleson 1975, 197).

Then he compares the Etruscan sun god, Usil, with the Egyptian god of the dead, Osiris, using etymology.

As to the scenes of the bulls and groups of people he says that the groups are erotic and they are part of the Troilos story to stress the erotic part of the Troilos story with Achilles pursuing the youth out of love or sexual desire. Then the two bulls (or the bull and the Acheloos) could correspond to the sacred bulls of Helios, angry at the recreation of this impious deed committed (Oleson 1975, 197-198).

Oleson is strongly convinced that all these details mean that the artist who painted the tomb was familiar with the literary source. But to Oleson this is not just a Greek myth in an Etruscan tomb. Achilles himself chose to be a glorious warrior and die young rather than living a safe life and grow old, while the Etruscan world was ruled by fate. Both the city of Troy and the Etruscans were subjects to fate and to the Etruscan artist it was natural that the setting of the sun, as a cosmic death, would foretell the death of a young prince (Oleson 1975, 200).

Oleson points out that the Etruscans were fascinated by Greek culture, but adopted it to Etruscan needs.

In 1986 R. R. Holloway wrote about the Tomb of the Bulls also published in the *AJA*. He agrees that the main scene is of Achilles and Troilos. He then states that the scene is symbolizing sacrifice, and mentions that scenes of slaughter are common in Etruscan funerary art with the most notable example being Achilles sacrificing Trojan youths in the Francois Tomb at Vulci. Thus, the act of sacrifice will forever be kept in this tomb (Holloway 1986, 448).

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He then criticize Oleson's idea of Apollo/Helios being present in the painting as a divinity would always be rendered in an anthropomorphic form, and the erotic scenes above the main painting cannot be said to emphasize homosexuality as one of them is heterosexual (Holloway 1986, 448).

Holloway tells us that these scenes are instead apotropaic and are protection against the Evil Eye. First of all the bulls are warding off the Evil Eye as they have horns that are still seen on modern amulets for protection against the Evil Eye. And so a phallus or an erotic scene can be used as protection against it as well.

Then Holloway turns his attention to the wall directly opposite these paintings, with the horseman riding towards the chimaera, and on the other side the sea creatures and the rider. The rider on the horse would be Troilos in the shape of Bellerophon, but with a horse instead of Pegasus recognized as Troilos on his Phrygian cap and the hair hanging over his shoulders. The act of riding towards the chimaera symbolizes his way to the realm of shades after his sacrificial death. This shows that the Etruscan artist knew about Greek mythology, but changed it to fit into an Etruscan setting (Holloway 1986, 452). The scene with the sea creatures would be another soul travelling to his destination on a hippocampus, but it is not Troilos this time and instead it could possibly be Arath Spuriana.

He concludes that although this tomb has been inspired by Greek art and mythology it is clearly in an Etruscan context (Holloway 1986, 452).

In 1994 J. P. Small mentions, while writing about the differences and similarities in Greek and Etruscans dining and party culture, that the "indecent pictures" in graves are subordinate to the main scenes and seemingly just part of "life" (Small 1994, 88). She also quotes Theopompus:

"...[i]t is no disgrace for Etruscans to be seen doing anything in the open, or even having anything done to them." (Apud Athen. Deipn, 12.517e).

Thus these scenes are not anything more than a reflection of how life was.

From 2004 we have R. Leighton writing about the tomb in his 'Tarquinia – an Etruscan City'. Leighton first of all states that the tomb paintings were private, not meant for the public to see, but in a time capsule to eternalise the reality of these images. The tomb should be seen as a sanctuary with the altar in the Achilles/Troilos scene and the trees symbolizing a sacred grove (Leighton 2004, 116).

Leighton tells about the complexity of the Etruscan religion and how haruspicy and augury made play of microcosms and dualisms. Therefore art in a tomb only meant for decorations, without any reli-

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gious or philosophical meaning, would be completely pointless in the Etruscan world (Leighton 2004, 119).

About the main painting Leighton is not against the idea of the scene being a sacrifice with the altar between Achilles and Troilos. As to the erotic scenes it might refer to the sexual desire Achilles feels (Leighton 2004, 119).

He also mentions that the Acheloos has been identified with Troy's Scamander river ("roaring like a bull"; Iliad, 21.237), which flowed red with the blood of Achilles victims and rebuked his cruelty. The Acheloos might disapprove of the homosexual couple, although the sodomizing figure here resembles Troilos and not Achilles (Leighton 2004, 119).

The murder scene recurs on Greek vases, but Leighton says that the allusion to sacrifice might have had a special appeal to the Etruscans. So again we see Greek art and mythology in an Etruscan context.

All of the above mentioned scholars seem to agree that the main painting in the tomb is about Achilles and Troilos but none of them proves why it has to be so.

To Oleson it is important to see that Apollo/Helios is present, eventually to symbolize the cycle of life and death, and the erotic scenes and the bulls are just there as a supplement to this story.

To Holloway it is about keeping a sacrifice inside the tomb and then the erotic scenes and bulls are about warding off the Evil Eye, and on the other side of the tomb Arath Spuriana and Troilos are going to the after world.

According to Small we have an everyday scene, depicted in this grave, of Etruscan sexual life.

Leighton points out that one has to remember the religious context of the tomb. Etruscan religion was very complex and comprehensive, so for example an everyday scene of life in the tomb would make no sense.

In 'Religion in Ancient Etruria' written by J.-R. Jannot in 2005 it is being described how everything in the world was ruled by higher powers; even the gods were ruled by some higher power or fate (Jannot 2005, 15). Time and space were completely controlled from above, but the gods or higher powers could communicate with people by sending various signs, and people could communicate back with prayers or sacrifice.

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Thus the Etruscans based an extensive science on reading all kinds of signs, and even in history and mythology. The Etruscans divided time into saecula and Jannot writes about these saecula:

“In their mechanical succession they repeated, for the Etruscans, identical patterns in slightly different ways. What had happened had happened and would happen again: that was the conviction of the Etruscan people. And the importance of history, of knowledge of the past, even as transfigured in epic or myth, consisted in this.” (Jannot 2005, 16).

As examples of these myths happening again, he mentions Bellerophon and the chimaera as an aristocratic hero liberating his city from disorder or the Etruscan struggle against Gaul. He also mentions Achilles sacrifice of the Trojan prisoners as having repeated itself in the massacre of the Romans by the people of Vulci, and later in the slaughter of 307 Roman prisoners in Tarquinia in 358 BC (Jannot 2005, 16). And each of these historical massacres would repeat itself century after century.

So if we are to believe the research of Jannot, then maybe the Achilles/Troilos scene is a symbol of a historical event that goes back in mythic times and has then repeated itself ever since and maybe in the lifetime of the owner of the tomb.

The Etruscan culture and religion still seem to be shrouded in mysteries as all these scholars cannot seem to agree about what these tomb paintings are about. They all make points, but several of these points are based on knowledge of the Greek culture, as Small writes:

“If the scholar removes his Greek sunglasses, he has a chance to view the Etruscans with merely modern eyes. Unfortunately, certain details, particular practices are still fuzzy, because the corrective lenses necessary to sharpen the focus no longer exists...It must never be forgotten by the visitor to the past that those differences exist. Simply put, the Etruscans are not Greeks.” (Small 1994, 89).

To correctly interpret these tomb paintings one would need an extensive knowledge of Etruscan funeral customs, tombs and to be familiar with Etruscan religion and their perception of time, history and space. But until then, we have gone as far as concluding that even though it looks a bit Greek when we glance at it with our “Greek sunglasses”, it is definitely Etruscan culture and art we see here, with all the Etruscan mysteries still unresolved. So even though the Greeks had a great impact on the Etruscan culture as they

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colonized Italy, and the Etruscans seemed to know about the literary sources of it and not just copying it, the Etruscans managed to fit it in with their own culture and make parts of the Greek culture Etruscan instead of adapting the Etruscan culture to the Greek way.

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