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First in Flight:
A Comprehensive Study of Etruscan Winged “Demons”

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Introduction: Iconography and Ideology

Etruscan winged Underworld figures (commonly referred to as winged “demons”) represent one of the most fascinating and least understood aspects of funerary iconography in ancient Etruria. Their function, along with their origin, has long been the subject of scholarly debates. However, over the last two decades, scholars¹ have begun to take a closer look at these chthonic figures. Recent scholarship has begun to provide answers to many of the most fundamental questions concerning their role, even if disagreements remain over their murky origins². Expanding on interpretations that have cast new light on how these winged (and non winged) Underworld figures functioned, questions concerning Etruscan religious beliefs and funerary ideology can now be reconsidered.

One such question concerns the sudden increase in the appearance of winged “demons” that begins to occur around the end of the fifth century BCE. By the mid-fourth century, this shift in funerary iconography supplanted what were once exuberant scenes of dancing, banqueting, funerary games, and sexual encounters. These Underworld figures are attested in not only wall painting, but in vase painting and stone sculpture, among other media. Some scholars have claimed that these winged icons were indicative of an impending sense of doom and a pervasive pessimism that invaded Etruria at the end of the

¹ This study of Etruscan winged “demons” is especially indebted to the scholarship of Nancy T. De Grummond,
² Janos Szilágyi (1989, 613) argues that the seventh century BCE presence of winged Underworld figures supports the argument in favor of a rich native Etruscan mythological tradition, independent of foreign inspiration. Martelli vehemently disagrees with this assessment, claiming instead that imported Attic black and red-figure vases were the primary source of inspiration in the formation of Etruscan myth (*see* Rizzo and Martelli 1989). Claims like this imply that the Etruscans were just mindless consumers of Greek models and are untenable, in my opinion. Krauskopf, a leading authority on Etruscan Underworld figures writes “The numerous demon-figures are...an Etruscan peculiarity, for which Greek parallels can scarcely be found” (2013, 521).

fifth century BCE due to external pressures from hostile neighbors, such as Rome³. Less substantiated, however, is the assertion that this change was symptomatic of a shift in Etruscan funerary ideology and traditions concerning death and the afterlife⁴.

I, therefore, reassess the notion that an abrupt shift in Etruscan funerary iconography (spearheaded by the appearance of winged “demon”) at the end of the fifth century BCE signaled a shift in Etruscan funerary ideology. Closer examination of Etruscan “demon” iconography, and its related themes of guarding, guiding, and protecting, suggests instead that a natural evolution occurred where the popularization of a new, but quite familiar, visual repertoire (i.e. winged “demons”) was used to express continuity in ideas regarding the transition of the deceased from this world to the next. Through a comparative analysis of funerary iconography in Etruria, we can identify antecedents that emphasized the care and protection of the deceased and their immortality in the afterlife. Furthermore, I believe that this evidence strongly suggests that the Etruscans turned inward at the end of the fifth century, drawing on models from their own rich cultural

³ De Grummond (2006, 9) writes with regard to the Roman conquest of Etruria between the beginning of the fourth and the mid-first centuries BCE that “it is worth considering how this acculturation affected the depictions of myth in Etruria, and in particular to see how and why there is a new concern with themes of the Underworld and afterlife, sometimes showing pessimism and preoccupation with the fate of the individuals as well as the Etruscan people as a whole.” She is certainly not the first scholar to have suggested a possible relationship between changing funerary iconography at the end of the fifth century and the Roman conquest of the Italic peninsula in the centuries that followed.

Additionally, in correspondence with Professor De Grummond in March of this year (2016), she raised the highly speculative possibility that plague (such as was visited on Athens in 429 BCE, and later on Rome at the end of the fifth century) may have also inflicted heavy casualties on the population in Etruria around the same time. Parallels, she suggests, *may* exist between the winged “demons” we see appear in Etruscan funerary art at the end of the fifth century BCE, and the demons we see in Christian art many centuries later during the Late Medieval Period perhaps in response to the Black Death that was spreading across Europe. This theory is completely untested, but worth noting as an area for future exploration.

⁴ Torelli (1999, 154) for instance, argues that “a crisis in Etrusco-Italic ideology of death” is replaced by “a Dionysiac message of salvation” as early as the end of the sixth century BCE, as witnessed in the Tomb 1999 at Tarquinia. Moreover, he suggests that during the fifth century the tomb itself shifts from being thought of as a “liminal space” between the living and the dead, to one that belongs entirely to the “realm of the dead,” where Greek models of the Underworld are sought after by Etruscans to express their changing belief systems (157).

heritage. Although funerary iconography may have changed, traditional ideological beliefs around death and the afterlife remained the same.

Background

The Etruscans were an indigenous⁵ Italic tribe who inhabited west central Italy in an area roughly bounded by the Arno River in the north, and the Tiber River in the south⁶. Their presence is attested through an enormous corpus of art, architecture, and a myriad of material cultural remains dating back to the Villanovan culture in the eleventh and tenth centuries BCE⁷. Known primarily through their funerary depositions and vast necropoleis, their habitations sites remain largely unexcavated⁸. Built in close proximity to their settlements, many of these necropoleis, such as the Banditaccia at ancient Caere and the Monterozzi at Tarquinia, each contain thousands of tombs. A clear need to maintain a close link between the living and dead is a theme that plays throughout over nine hundred years of Etruscan history. Evidence of complex spiritual and religious beliefs and practices can be identified through funerary iconography containing visual narratives that appear on a variety of mediums including wall painting, vase painting, sculptural relief, free standing sculpture, carved gem stones, and various other works in bronze, and precious metals. Through this type of visual repertoire, scholars have been able to piece together a broad

⁵ Much has been made regarding the alleged “Anatolian origin” for the Etruscans based on the mtDNA test results from Achilli, et al. (2007). The more recent work and publication from Ghiretto, et al. (2013) directly refutes this earlier study, stating that “Etruscan culture developed locally, and not as an immediate consequence of immigration from the Eastern Mediterranean shores” (*from article’s abstract*).

⁶ Etruscan colonization has been attested as well from as far north as Po River Valley, as far east as the Adriatic Sea, and as far south as Campana.

⁷ Torelli 1986, 50.

⁸ This is due to continuous occupation of such habitation sites all the way up to modern day.

understanding of Etruscan funerary ideology, although concepts about the Etruscan Underworld and afterlife still remain opaque⁹.

This process has been significantly hindered, however, by the lack of surviving textual evidence from the Etruscans themselves¹⁰. Despite the known existence of a rich literary tradition concerning divination, the brontoscopic calendar, religious observances, and funerary practices, precious little in the Etruscan’s own non-Indo-European language has been passed down to us¹¹. The little textual support scholars do have to draw on comes from Greek, Roman, and early Christian authors whose accounts (often many generations removed) are to be read with caution as they are often biased and skewed towards the contemporary audience for whom they were written for¹². What has survived is the art the Etruscans produced, and the contexts that, for the most part, preserved this wealth of material – early Iron Age burial pits, monumental tumuli from the Orientalizing era, and chamber tombs of varying sizes from the Archaic era onward. Individually and collectively, therefore, burial assemblages, wall paintings, and tomb architecture are to be read as cultural documents. In the absence of textual material, these works of Etruscan art are our best means for interpreting nearly nine centuries of Etruscan funerary customs and practices.

⁹ Bonfante 1986, 286; Krauskopf 2006, 66.

¹⁰ It is well known that the Etruscans adopted the Greek alphabet for use with their own non-Indo-European language around the middle of the eighth century BCE through contact with Euboean Greek colonists in southern Italy. *See* Torelli (1986, 49-50) for further discussion.

¹¹ *See* Turfa 2012 for her discussion on divination and the brontoscopic calendar; De Grummond (2006, 10) references the well attested existence of the *Etrusca disciplina*, a voluminous collection of materials concerning religious lore, omens from the gods, and the nature of the universe. Within this collection existed the *Libri acheruntic*, a special group of writings concerning the Underworld.

¹² De Grummond 1986(b) provides a thorough compilation of quotes from Greek, Roman, and early Christian authors. Of note are: Pliny, *NH* 35.5.16-18; Livy *History* 7.17.2-6; Virgil *Aeneid* VI.331-360; Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 7.26: “...genetrix et mater superstitionis Etruria” – “Etruria [was] the source and mother of superstition.” (*Author’s trans.*)

Etruscan Winged Underworld Figures

The phrase, Etruscan winged Underworld figures, refers to a group of chthonic figures whose presence in Etruscan funerary art and ideology can be detected at least as far back as the end of the seventh century BCE¹³. Instances of their depictions, as already noted, begin to dominate the funerary sphere beginning at the end of the fifth century, continuing through the second century BCE. It is at this time that Rome’s ‘manifest destiny’ march across the Italic peninsula finally absorbs the last of the Etruscan city-states under the yoke of Roman rule.

Through surviving inscriptions, we are able to identify at least three of these winged Underworld figures by name: Charu(n), Vanth, and Tuchulcha. Charu(n) [*Fig. 1*] appears over one hundred times in Etruscan art¹⁴. He is easily identified through his attributive blue skin (the color of decaying flesh), the large mallet he usually carries (for opening and closing the gates to the Underworld), a large hooked nose, dark furrowed brow, deep-set eyes, high leather hunting boots, and a short sleeved tunic belted around the waist (proper attire for traversing the rocky terrain of the Underworld). His female counterpart, Vanth [*Fig. 2*], carries a torch (to light the dark passage through the Underworld), is often depicted with her breasts exposed (thought to be apotropaic), wearing the same characteristic hunting boots as Charu(n), and often brandishing snakes. Representations of Tuchulcha [*Fig. 3*], as we shall see, are exceedingly rare. The figure has the beak of a bird of

¹³ Krauskopf (2013, 521) raises the intriguing notion that winged figures, like those we see in the Underworld, were “probably...in all...manifestations of Etruscan religion.” Evidence including a winged male figure from the Campana plaques (a group of painted terracotta plaques excavated from a chamber tomb at the Banditaccia necropolis at Cerveteri in the mid nineteenth century) certainly suggests this may have been the case. The topic deserves further exploration.

¹⁴ De Grummond 2005, 214.

prey, the ears of a quadruped, and the facial hair of an adult male. Tuchulcha’s gender is not always clear, and is a matter of some debate. All three of these figures share the attribute of wings in common. However it should be noted that Charu(n) and Vanth are also sometimes depicted without wings¹⁵.

Winged Underworld figures can be found in wall painting throughout Etruria, most notably at Tarquinia, Vulci, and Sarteano, from the second half of the fifth century through the first quarter of the third century BCE¹⁶. In Bologna, these winged figures are found on funerary stele from the fourth century BCE. From Orvieto, a collection of Etruscan red-figure vases known as the “Vanth” Group also dates to the fourth century BCE. And from Chiusi, a collection of terracotta ash urns from the late third and early second century provide us with some of the last examples of Etruscan winged Underworld figures. These examples comprise just a handful of locations throughout Etruria where winged chthonic figures have been identified.

Dating and Nomenclature

For the most part Etruscologists have adopted the standard dating scheme widely used to date the Greek world. That is, terminology that designates periods as Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic has been mapped onto Etruria to provide a framework with which to separate and talk about specific epochs in art and architecture. Greek models, however, sometimes fail to properly convey the particular style we see expressed in Etruria during a given period. These foreign models tend to take agency away from the Etruscans by

¹⁵ The significance of these variations will be discussed later on.

¹⁶ It should be noted that two very badly faded small winged figures appear in the *Tomb of the Maiden* from Tarquinia roughly contemporary with the *Tomb of the Blue Demons* in the last half of the fifth century BCE. Steingraber (2006, 132) describes them as “winged genii.” Further investigation is needed to make an accurate assessment.

removing a work of art from its Etruscan context. Certainly Hellenistic and Classical influences made their way west from Greece and the eastern Mediterranean via trade networks and through immigration¹⁷. However, overreliance on these Greek models of artistic style to filter Etruscan art through has created a situation where some scholars have unfairly criticized and placed value judgments on Etruscan works of art for not adhering to a “Classical” style¹⁸. Our goal with Etruscan art, the same as with Greek or Roman art, should be to approach it first from its native context.

Therefore, I prefer the more neutral dating scheme posited by De Grummond: Early Period (1000/900-450 BCE), Middle Period (450-325/300 BCE), and Late Period (325/300-1st century BCE)¹⁹. She further subdivides the Early Period into the Villanovan era (1000-750/700 BCE), the Orientalizing era (750/700-600 BCE), and the Archaic era (600-450 BCE)²⁰. I believe this scheme offers greater clarity and a more fruitful analysis when tracing iconographic and ideological trends through roughly nine hundred years of Etruscan funerary art.

We must also revisit the accepted terminology used to describe our winged Underworld figures. Although we have already identified the proper names for three of these winged figures, we do not know what the Etruscans themselves may have referred collectively (or individually) to these Underworld figures as, if indeed such a term existed

¹⁷ See Åkerström (1981); Naso (2010); Steingraber (2006).

¹⁸ Earlier generations of Etruscologists, Otto J. Brendel in particular, were trained during a time when a clear bias that favored Greek culture pervaded the study of the ancient Mediterranean. The pioneering work of these individuals is in no way diminished as a result.

¹⁹ De Grummond 2005, 2-9.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

at all. Nonetheless, the vast majority of scholars today almost reflexively refer to these figures as “demons”²¹.

The term “demon,” however, is grossly misleading. In the colloquial sense, “demon” corrupts the true nature of these Underworld figures who, in the vast majority of narratives we find them in, operate as guides, guardians, and gatekeepers²². Unfortunately, in the hands of late Medieval and Renaissance artists who we know came in contact with Etruscan (as well as Roman) works of art, Etruscan winged Underworld figures were often hijacked as artistic models for the satanic beings we see populate works of art from Giotto to Michelangelo²³. Eighteenth century Scottish antiquarian, James Byres, and his Polish draftsman, Franciszek Smuglewicz, did little to help this misconception. As Smuglewicz’s illustrations demonstrate, the winged Underworld figures they encountered on the walls of tombs (most notably *The Tomb of the Cardinal*, Tarquinia, ca. fourth century BCE) were rendered as evil and nefarious creatures, out to prey on the deceased, and fulfilling some sort of demonic role as conceived through a Christian context²⁴. These antiquated and lazy interpretations can no longer be tolerated. And neither should the accepted nomenclature. Terms like ‘escort’, ‘guardian’, ‘witness’, and ‘protector’ more accurately describe these figures by the functions they perform. The phrase “winged Underworld figure” will have preference over winged “demon,” though for brevity’s sake, “demon” shall still be retained

²¹ To my mind winged “friends” comes most naturally, and is far more expressive than a generic term like “figure.” The latter, however, is less colloquial and therefore more appropriate for formal discussions.

²² It bears repeating from the previous subsection that Charu(n)’s mallet would have been used to knock open and close shut the gates to the Underworld, not to wield against the deceased. Jannot (1997, Fig.4) provides an outstanding illustration of a mallet interacting with a wooden gate.

²³ De Grummond 1986(a), 23-24.

²⁴ Byres (1842); See Ridgway (2003; and 2005, Fig. 7) for discussion and illustration.

at times. Placing the word “demon” in quotes when it is used, however, serves as a reminder to the reader of the term’s inadequacies and clearly biased connotations²⁵.

Research and Methodology

This study builds on previous scholarship that I believe clearly demonstrates the mostly²⁶ benevolent nature of these chthonic figures²⁷, as they appear in both their winged and non-winged forms. Much of this earlier work has focused on their attributive features. Indeed, I have just spent a fair amount of time in similar discussion as a way to introduce these figures. My aim, however, is to move past these important surface details to get at the ideological message(s) these figures were meant to convey within their ancient Etruscan funerary and religious spheres. It is not enough to just identify a winged Underworld figure such as the ubiquitous Charu(n) as a ‘guardian’ and ‘gatekeeper,’ though it is appropriate to do so given his close association with gates and because of the mallet with which he is so often depicted. We must also tie these attributes and roles to the larger set of ideological beliefs that, themselves, fit within the broader, complex fabric of Etruscan burial customs and religious practices.

Although this study is intended to be as comprehensive as possible, the scope of this current paper is to introduce and focus on only one of several areas of inquiry around which the presence of winged Underworld figures in Etruscan funerary art plays a critical role. While it is my intention to introduce material examples containing “demon”

²⁵ As for the Greek term *daimones*, I would argue that this Greek term fails to fully illustrate the true nature of these Etruscan winged Underworld figures. As with our previous discussion on Greek models improperly used to describe Etruscan works of art, more neutral terminology should be applied here as well.

²⁶ Exceptions to this rule, as we shall see, do exist.

²⁷ De Grummond (2005); Jannot (1998; 2005); Ridgway (2003; 2005); and Pieraccini and Del Chiaro (2013).

iconography from a variety of artistic media (wall painting, vase painting, and sculpture), the extensive list of similar examples numbering well into the hundreds will have to wait until such time as an even more ambitious project can be mastered²⁸.

Transition in the Fifth Century BCE

The claim that a sudden and more frequent appearance of winged Underworld figures at the end of the fifth century BCE was the result of an abandonment of traditional Etruscan funerary ideology, must be challenged head on. Mario Torelli²⁹ has written extensively about an alleged “crisis” having visited Etruria during this period. His cause and effect scenario concerning the historical narrative of the fifth century BCE³⁰ in the western Mediterranean, however, is not all-together satisfying. Undoubtedly socio-economic and political upheaval occurred in many regions on the Italic peninsula during the fifth century. In Etruria the archaeological record attests to a decline in the quantity of grave goods³¹. Some scholars have also noted an impoverishment in stylistic innovations, particularly where wall painting was concerned³². Exemplified by the way banqueting scenes gain notoriety on the back wall of Archaic era tombs in the fifth century, this conventional theme forms the basis for his argument. It is in these scenes of dining and drinking in the

²⁸ Appendix A contains an introductory list. It is my deep conviction that a truly comprehensive study of Etruscan “demon” iconography is long overdue. A focused study taking into account all evidence that survives referencing winged figures as they appear in their funerary (and other?) contexts would no doubt benefit the larger field of Etruscology in ways that will help to temper the long perceived influences on Etruria from the Greek mainland.

²⁹ Torelli 1986; 1999.

³⁰ Torelli sees this “crisis” as brought on by a number of factors: the loss of Latium by the Etruscans and the expulsion of the last Etruscan king at Rome (*see* Livy 1.36-59) in the final decades of the sixth century; the Etruscan naval defeat by the fleet of Syracuse at Cumae in 474 BCE (*see* Pindar *pyth* i.71; and Diodorus xi 51); and the hostile advancement of Umbro-Sabellian tribes who supplanted Etruscan rule in Campania by the last quarter of the fifth century. As a result, Greek imports into Etruria from *Magna Graecia* were disrupted. These imports were eventually rerouted through Spina, the trading center of the Po River Valley, on the Adriatic coast (1986, 55-56).

³¹ Torelli 1999, 56.

³² Brendel 1978, 263; Torelli 1986, 55; *and* 1999, 155.

afterlife that Torelli finds “Dionysiac messages of salvation”³³. He equates this allegedly new iconographic theme with a “crisis in the Etrusco-Italic ideology of death”³⁴. He thereby implies that the crisis that occurred above ground in the fifth century on a socio-political and economic level precipitated a crisis of a different kind under ground in the liminal space of the tomb. As a reaction to external stimuli, he alleges that the Etruscans turned their backs on over four centuries of traditional funerary ideology to embrace cults of foreign (Greek) origin. The effect included the allegedly new and sudden appearance of winged Underworld figures, as attested in the *Tomb of the Blue Demons*, ca. 400 BCE³⁵. We will return to this tomb below.

Torelli’s reasoning on this matter is puzzling. First of all, visual representations of the banquet itself are well attested throughout Etruria from as early as the seventh century BCE, where it can be found in a variety of contexts³⁶. Its novelty on the back walls of painted tombs during the fifth century can best be explained as simply one of several innovations in painted iconography and themes that we see throughout the Archaic era³⁷. More to the point, ritual feasting appears to have been an integral part of funerary ideology, as Pieraccini has written extensively³⁸. Bronze implements for roasting meats, items for mixing wine, and all sorts of vessels in bucchero and terracotta, for real and symbolic feasting, persist throughout Etruscan civilization as far back as the eighth century BCE.

³³ Torelli 1999, 154.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ See Torelli’s discussion on these “Greek doctrines” facilitated by “Greek models” (i.e. the “demons” that give the tomb its name) (1999, 157).

³⁶ An impasto ash urn from Montescudaio, ca. 625 BCE depicts a man seated at a table while a female servant (his wife?) offers him food (Haynes 2000, fig. 92). Terracotta plaques from the early sixth century at Acquarossa (Haynes 2000, fig. 120) and Poggio Civitate (Murlo) (Haynes 2000, fig. 105) depict banquet scenes with men and women reclining on *klinai*.

³⁷ Painted false doors often flanked by symmetrically placed figures, for instance, are one such innovation in painting from the sixth century BCE. We will return to their symbolism later.

³⁸ See Pieraccini 2003; and 2014(a, b).

Simply put, we are hard pressed to identify anything foreign about the banquet as an iconographic device by the time it appeared in fifth century wall painting³⁹.

I believe the fondness with which the banquet scene gained prominence in fifth century wall painting suggests something quite different. Reacting to whatever external pressures may have been present during the fifth century, the Etruscans chose to look inward to their own rich cultural traditions concerning death, burial and the afterlife. Relying on familiar themes, like the banquet, must have been a source of comfort as well as pride. Rather than abandoning traditional funerary ideologies, I see the Etruscans of the fifth century making a concerted effort to maintain ties with their ancestral past, and perhaps even to strengthen those connections. This is consistent with the overwhelming material evidence that testifies to the enormous time, effort, and expense the Etruscans invested in preparing for death. These lessons, I would further suggest, have a direct bearing on how we should perceive the appearance of winged Underworld figures at the end of the transitional fifth century BCE.

Tomb of the Blue Demons

I believe antecedents from the Orientalizing and Archaic eras will demonstrate that winged Underworld figures were closely associated with traditional funerary ideologies. These figures fulfilled the role of *psychompoi*, or guides for the dead. They offered protection to the deceased as they made their way along what could be a treacherous path through the Underworld. And they brought into focus the geographical terrain of the Underworld in a manner earlier epochs only hinted at. Recognizing these elements at the

³⁹ Krauskopf (2006, 77) and Ridgway (2007, 128) were among the first to challenge Torelli’s “over interpreted” conclusions regarding painted scenes of banqueting and their alleged connection to Dionysiac mystery cults having supposedly invaded Etruria during the fifth century. I draw my own inspiration from these voices of dissent.

end of the fifth century BCE in the *Tomb of the Blue Demons* provides us with an effective reference point.

Some of the earliest depictions of winged (and non-winged) Underworld figures in wall painting occur around 400 BCE in the *Tomb of the Blue Demons* at Tarquinia. The tomb is often described as transitional, bridging the perceived gap between the end of the Archaic era (and the aforementioned crisis) and the later phases of Etruscan civilization⁴⁰. Indeed the tomb presents both traditional and innovative iconographic elements and narrative themes. This modestly sized, single chamber tomb is accessed by a long, roughly cut dromos. Discovered in 1985 underneath the modern road that cuts through the Monterozzi Necropolis along the Il Calvario plateau, its frescoes are in fragile condition, and the tomb is not accessible to the general public.

The tomb’s narrative program consists of three continuous painted friezes on the left, right, and back walls⁴¹. The wall to the viewer’s left depicts a kind of funerary procession. The protagonist in the scene, a deceased male, is drawn by a *biga* towards the back wall of the tomb. Musicians walk in front of the chariot, while dancers follow behind. The scene is a lively one, and has parallels in contemporary and earlier wall painting⁴². On the back wall, as we would expect, a banqueting scene is depicted with four couples reclining on *klinai* with a *kylekeion* spilling over, as it were, onto the very end of the adjacent left wall. We can still make out the traces of what appears to be the ancient and highly symbolic act of passing an egg between one of these couples⁴³. In total, the tomb

⁴⁰ Krauskopf 2006, 73.

⁴¹ Steingraber (2006, 181) notes that the sides of the entrance wall were also painted with scenes that might depict either funerary games or a hunt. Part of a serpent’s head is also preserved.

⁴² Torelli 1999, Table 1.

⁴³ Pieraccini 2014(b), 278. Having been in the tomb in the summer of 2015, I believe the egg to be there as well.

adheres to the standard thematic devices of the fifth century, while adding a new landscape element to the repertoire.

On the right wall a scene of a journey through the Underworld is rendered in a large scale painted frieze [*Fig. 4*]. The protagonist in this Underworld landscape⁴⁴ appears to be a deceased woman making her way along a subterranean path. The scene is read from right to left on this side of the tomb. Our first encounter is with a black-skinned winged “demon.” The figure is in profile with a large hooked nose, bright, bushy red hair, traces of red in its forward facing pupil, and a red spur (perhaps a fang) jutting from its mouth [*Fig. 5*]. Sprouting from the figure’s back are a pair of large black wings. Dressed in a pale garment with a blue border and red trim, this sinister looking figure climbs on hands and knees over a rock, thought to be symbolic of the threshold to the Underworld⁴⁵. The black-skinned demon’s progress is checked by a second wingless Underworld figure brandishing two bearded snakes [*Fig. 6*]. To the left of this pair, another pair of Underworld figures leads our protagonist towards a veiled woman and child [*Fig. 7*]. The pair stands ready to greet the deceased woman. The narrative is completed by the depiction of a small skiff with a partially preserved oarsman who waits to carry the trio into the afterlife [*Fig. 8*].

The scene communicates strong ideological beliefs concerning the journey through the Underworld, the protection such a journey requires, and the critical assistance winged and non-winged Underworld figures can provide. The benevolent pair of Underworld figures that attend the deceased woman work in unison to escort her towards her waiting kin. The formidable blue-skinned figure uses the snakes he brandishes to menace the advancing black-skinned winged “demon.” This blue-skinned figure is larger than the other

⁴⁴ Pieraccini 2013, 252.

⁴⁵ Roncalli 1996, 47-48.

three figures. His musculature is clearly visible, and he wears some sort of *cuirass* that exposes his chest and arms, while protecting his left shoulder [Fig. 9]. The black-skinned winged “demon” with its threatening posture and frightful appearance is the only one of the four that may possibly be thought of in the colloquial sense of the word “demon.” The figure may serve as an important indicator that the Etruscans did conceive of the passage through the Underworld and into the afterlife as a potentially hazardous journey.

Contemporary comparanda communicates these same ideological themes. An Etruscan scarab from the end of the fifth century [Fig. 10] depicts two winged figures believed to be escorting a young man through the Underworld⁴⁶. While the provenience of the scarab is unknown, the gem, nonetheless, communicates the familiar message of guarding and guiding.

Additionally, a funerary stele from Bologna, dating to the mid-fifth century BCE [Fig. 11], is ripe with iconography representing this dual theme of the journey and of protection⁴⁷. The burial marker is carved in three registers. The upper register depicts two hybrid sea monsters. These hippocampi, as we shall see, are familiar iconographic symbols of the journey into the afterlife. The middle register depicts a man in a chariot drawn by two winged horses. Likely the deceased, his winged *biga* is being guided by a male winged Underworld figure. In the register below, we see a battle between a man on horseback and a nude Gallic warrior. Perhaps this alludes to the manner in which the deceased met his fate. The theme of journey is further reinforced through the decorative wave pattern that runs along the facing edge of the stele.

⁴⁶ Klinger 2013, 57.

⁴⁷ Brigue 1986, 117.

In review, there is little doubt as to the role these Underworld figures are serving in these examples from the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE. Still more fascinating are the funerary ideologies these roles communicate – the journey, and the need for protection through the physical terrain of the Underworld. Establishing these themes in the *Tomb of the Blue Demons* (and contemporary comparanda) will help us to identify antecedents and to associate their funerary ideologies as we look back to the earliest phases of Etruscan civilization.

Orientalizing Era (750/700-600 BCE)

The winged Underworld figure, Vanth, provides us with the earliest extant example of a winged chthonic figure at the end of the seventh century BCE. Janos Szilágyi’s extensive work on Etrusco-Corinthian ceramic material from 630 to 580 BCE produced a corpus of frequently used images identified on this distinctive style of pottery⁴⁸. In it, Szilágyi identifies an inscription to Vanth on the base of a piriform aryballos from Vulci that was found deposited in a tomb in Marsiliana d’Albegna⁴⁹. The inscription reads, “I am the beautiful offering to Vanth”⁵⁰. This inscription is one of only nine instances where Vanth’s name has been preserved, and its early date makes it especially unique. Szilágyi interprets

⁴⁸ Among other notable anthropomorphic forms identified by Szilágyi is a “Master of Birds” (De Grummond 2005, 6, fig. I.9). This winged male figure is often depicted in a crouching position (indicative of rapid movement). He appears on a late seventh, early sixth century alabastron with two birds resting on his outstretched wings. He holds a third bird around its neck.

⁴⁹ Szilágyi 1989, 624.

⁵⁰ Colonna 1997, 171; Jannot 2005, 71. Also note that while the Etruscan’s non-Indo-European language has not been deciphered, their adoption of the Greek alphabet in the mid-eight century BCE does make it possible to read short inscriptions (such as this one), as well as to help date material based on the way the form of the letters changed over time. Rex Wallace and Larissa Bonfante are leading authorities on matters related to the Etruscan language.

it as evidence for a native Etruscan mythological tradition, independent of Greek influences – a view echoed by others in later scholarship⁵¹.

Jannot has suggested that the artifact is evidence for the existence of an actual cult to the Underworld figure of Vanth⁵². Certainly the deposition of this offering as part of a tomb assemblage suggests a reciprocity between the deceased (or their family) and the Underworld figure/goddess Vanth. Two centuries later a similarly inscribed vessel excavated from a necropolis at Spina provides additional support for cult activity to Vanth⁵³. The inscription is in the nominative case – “*mi vant,*” or, “I am Vanth.” Like its late Orientalizing predecessor, the vessel was left in the tomb as a votive offering perhaps in exchange for Vanth’s assistance. We are safe to assume that Vanth’s intervention would have had to do with the care and protection of the deceased. And, indeed, as comparanda suggests, Vanth functioned as an escort for the deceased, a *psychopomp* through the Underworld⁵⁴. She often leads the deceased by the hand, or with an arm around their shoulder⁵⁵. With this context in mind, the deposition of votive offerings dedicated to this powerful Underworld figure must surely have been meant to invoke her protection and service.

Although it will not be until the Middle Period before we see for certain our first visual image of Vanth, her presence in the Orientalizing era sets a precedent for cult activity involving winged Underworld figures in general. Less than a century later, an inscription to Charu(n) was found on the foot of a black glazed terracotta bowl, thought to have come

⁵¹ Most notably De Grummond (2005); and Jannot (2005).

⁵² Jannot 2005, 71.

⁵³ Colonna 1997, 171.

⁵⁴ See Figs. 23 and 24.

⁵⁵ See Fig. 24 for one such example from the second century BCE Chiusian sarcophagus of Hasti Afunei.

from Cerveteri⁵⁶. Its presence strongly suggests similar votive offerings were left as part of cult observances centered around one of our most popular Underworld figures. Long before visual representations of either Vanth or Charu(n) can be positively identified, cult activity not only points to their long established presence, but also to the ideologies their attributes will come to symbolize. In this way, these votive offerings compel us to rethink the position winged Underworld figures held in the earliest phases of Etruscan civilization.

As the Orientalizing era drew to a close, innovations in wall painting previously referenced provide us with additional antecedents that also point to continuity in funerary ideology. Iconography that includes guardians of doors, real and false, in wall painting, along with hippocampi and other references to the journey, set the stage for the images of winged Underworld figures that follow.

Archaic Era (600-450 BCE)

The earliest extant wall paintings from Tarquinia come from the *Tomb of the Panthers*, ca. 600 BCE⁵⁷. The tomb features two heraldically placed, highly stylized, spotted felines on the back wall of a small chamber tomb [Fig. 12]. The right feline is in profile. The left feline opposite has its head turned towards the viewer with the rest of its body in profile. Between them rests a low altar decorated with what Steingraber calls “a masklike protoma of another predatory feline”⁵⁸. The pair of felines rest their front paws either right above or directly on top of the altar. It is not clear how we should interpret this scene.

⁵⁶ See Colonna 1997, Fig 5.

⁵⁷ Steingraber 2006, 61; 1986, 333. Note that Steingraber places this tomb at the end of the Orientalizing era.

⁵⁸ Ibid 2006, 63.

Perhaps it was meant to protect the deceased by warding off the ‘Evil Eye’ in an apotropaic manner. The felines may also have been symbolic references to life after death⁵⁹.

More curious, though, and the reason I call attention to the back wall of the tomb, are the set of small wings that appear to sprout from the head of each feline. These often overlooked renderings are outlined in red paint and filled in with black, similar in style to the curling tip of the left panther’s tail. Damage to this part of the fresco makes visual analysis challenging. It is difficult to tell whether these wings might be attached to actual figures.⁶⁰ Whatever the case, the appearance of wings in the earliest example of tomb painting from Tarquinia, where we will see the largest contingency of winged “demons” two to three hundred years later, is probably not a coincidence.

Worthy of note are two additional felines flanking the inside of the doorway. The placement of these “rampant” felines must have been deliberate⁶¹. Ridgway argues that the seated felines on either side of the door were conceived of as “guardians of the tomb, protectors of the dead and of their place in the cosmic order of things”⁶². Ridgway points to the nearly life size winged lions painted in the *Tomb of San Andrea* in Cancellone near Magliano in Toscana from the end of the seventh century BCE as antecedents themselves to this theme of protection derived from iconography of both predatory felines, and, I would argue, from the wings they possess⁶³. In short, this theme of protection is hardly new to us. New, however, is the iconography that we see appear in the earliest examples of wall

⁵⁹ This is based, in part, off Naso’s interpretation that felines as represented in Etruscan art were symbols of death: “The function of tomb painting may be more than decorative: one can postulate an additional symbolic meaning, in which...lions may be a symbol of violent death” (2010, 76).

⁶⁰ Pieraccini has proposed that perhaps rather than figures, the felines are wearing winged headdresses.

⁶¹ We must always remind ourselves that a patron’s choice in iconography, especially in wall painting, was deliberate. See Bonfante 2003 and 2007 and related bibliography.

⁶² 2007, 133.

⁶³ Ibid.

painting from the Archaic era, and the way it is being used to express the underlying and familiar ideology of protection. Painted false doors appear next in the sixth century and become another symbolically charged innovation in Archaic era iconography used to express the fundamental theme of the journey.

In all, Torelli identifies seventeen tombs from Tarquinia between 560 and 500 BCE that contain at least one (and in several instances up to three) painted false doors. In close association with innovations of the sixth century in wall painting that include scenes of dancing, revelry, banqueting, funerary games, and even erotic encounters, the placement of painted false doors within these narratives begins to designate the tomb as a liminal space, operating between the terrestrial world and the Afterworld⁶⁴. These painted false doors, therefore, were likely conceived as symbolic portals to the afterlife. They were a way for the deceased to pass into the world beyond by using the geography of the tomb as symbolized through its painted iconography.

In addition to figures that flanked the sides of painted false doors, we also see innovations in the Archaic era through painted imagery that depicts hippocampi (half horse, half sea creature) in the upper pediment of the back or entrance wall of the tomb. The gable, or tympanum, seems to have achieved symbolic importance during the Archaic era, often physically separated by a series of horizontal ground lines from the main portion of the wall and the narrative scene depicted thereon. Further referencing and emphasizing the theme of the journey, these hybrid sea creatures are sometimes depicted with the deceased riding on their back, such as in the tympanum on the entrance wall in the *Tomb of the Bulls* at Tarquinia, ca. 530 BCE. The hippocampus here appears to be carrying a young

⁶⁴ Torelli 1999, 157.

man towards a landmass, interpreted as the Afterworld⁶⁵. This scene of journey and of destination⁶⁶ is repeated in countless tombs throughout the Archaic era, to the point where the motif becomes conventional⁶⁷. These narrative scenes bring into focus the deeply engrained belief within the Etruscan funerary context in the existence of *psychopompoi*, or guides for the dead. It will be this core principle, continuous throughout all phases of Etruscan civilization that will give rise in the fourth and third centuries to the visual representations of winged Underworld figures.

Middle Period (450-325/300 BCE)

We have seen how antecedents for winged Underworld figures can be traced as far back as the Orientalizing era on inscribed votive offerings to Vanth. We have established a link between the iconography of doors in Archaic wall painting with thematic representations of the journey. We have further established a tradition that dates back to the earliest phases of Etruscan civilization that placed great value in the role of *psychopompoi* – identifying their presence in Archaic wall painting in the form of hippocampi and deceased riders on horseback. We have also briefly explored the notion that the tomb itself functioned as a kind of Underworld geographical landscape, guiding and directing the deceased through the Underworld and into the afterlife. And we have designated the *Tomb of the Blue Demons* as a reference point from which to look back at these earlier epochs. It is time we look forward to the fourth century, and to the comparanda that will help solidify our argument.

⁶⁵ Steingräber 2006, 91; Jannot 2006, 61.

⁶⁶ Krauskopf 2006, 69.

⁶⁷ Along with hippocampi, frequently occurring stylized motifs that include wave patterns interspersed with diving dolphins, such as in the *Tomb of the Lionesses* at Tarquinia, ca. 520 BCE, are also believed to reference the sea journey into the afterlife. We will note the longevity of this motif as it occurs in one of our latest examples of tomb painting from Tarquinia, the *Tomb of the Typhon*, ca. 275 BCE.

The second claim that an increase in “demon” iconography reflected an overwhelming sense of pessimism that invaded Etruria during the Middle and Late Periods needs to be addressed⁶⁸. We have seen, to some extent, this notion played out in the *Tomb of the Blue Demons* through interpretations conceived of Greek models replacing traditional Etruscan ideologies during the transitional fifth century BCE. But, as Ridgway argues, one tomb above all has been used by the “proponents of the ‘doom and gloom’ theory⁶⁹, namely the *Tomb of the Orcus* at Tarquinia, dating to the last several decades of the fourth century BCE. The *Tomb of the Orcus* is in fact comprised of three tombs (*Orcus I, II, and III*). *Orcus I* and *II* were joined sometime at the beginning of the third century BCE by a long connecting corridor, *Orcus III*⁷⁰. The underground sepulchre is entered today through a long dromos and doorway that leads into *Orcus I*. Ridgway provides an excellent schematic ground plan of the tomb⁷¹ [*Fig. 13*], and the placement of its extensive painted elements.

The program of paintings in this tomb reflects a vision of the Underworld, as we have yet never seen. The narrative scenes and images appear to have been inspired by Homer’s *Odyssey*, and other contemporary works of Greek literature⁷². Scenes such as the blinding of Polyphemos are captured in true fresco, the artist having first applied several centimeters of plaster on which to work. Theseus and Peirithoos, along with figures like the bandaged Agamemnon, the shade of Tiresias, and Ajax are each identified by inscriptions. *Animulae*, or “tiny human silhouettes,” cling to the reeds, having been freed from the

⁶⁸ This claim has multiple sources. They include the unsubstantiated claim that Torelli makes, suggesting that a crisis of faith, so to speak, was the cause for an increase in winged “demons” at the end of the fifth century. Mischaracterizations by earlier generations (*see Dating and Nomenclature subsection*) that interpreted these figures through Judeo-Christian constructs are another source.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 131.

⁷⁰ Steingraber 2006, 206-209.

⁷¹ Ridgway 2007, Fig. 1.

⁷² Ridgway 2007, 131; Jannot 2005, 67.

“weight of living bodies”⁷³. And in the back recesses of the tomb, the divine couple, Aita and Phersipnai (Greek Hades and Persephone), holds court with attendant monsters of the Underworld including the triple-bodied giant Geryon, Cerberus, and the Hydra. To this narrative program, steeped in “Greek doctrine”⁷⁴, no less than eight winged figures, three preserved almost in their entirety, are inserted.

Rather than a vision of the terrifying, nightmarish “demonic Underworld”⁷⁵ that some scholars have interpreted these scenes to mean, Ridgway suggests otherwise. She bases her argument not just on the manner she perceives the winged Underworld figures in the various narratives to be functioning, but on the continuity in ideologies they communicate. Crossing the threshold into the tomb, our eye is immediately drawn to the well-preserved rendering of the winged Underworld “demon,” Charu(n) [*Fig. 14*]. A partial inscription leaves no doubt as to his identity. But even without that, we would be able to identify the figure through his various attributes. The mallet we would expect him to be carrying is only partially preserved. His wings are magnificent, the colors still vibrant over two thousand years after they were painted. The feathers alternate colors between dark red and a grayish blue, with a deep golden yellow patch on the wing’s interior. The outer rim of his wings features a diamond pattern that is identical to the markings of a highly venomous snake in Italy (then and now), the adder⁷⁶.

Charu(n) was joined originally by another winged “demon,” whose image has not survived. The pair flanked a recessed wall on which a family banquet scene was rendered.

⁷³ Jannot 2005, 67.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ De Grummond 2005, 231. In the same aforementioned correspondence with De Grummond, she referred to this point of view as the accepted “party line,” warranting further investigation.

⁷⁶ Hostetler, 2002 *in* De Grummond 2006, 218.

We know through inscription this banquet included at least three generations of the same family that was entombed here⁷⁷. In the connecting corridor, *Orcus III*, the painted remnants of a similar family banquet scene are now mostly lost due to renovations when they connected the two chambers (*Orcus I and II*). A low bench was cut down the length of the wall where sarcophagi of the portrait type, typical from the third century on, were placed. Ridgway suggests these sarcophagi were configured in front of this wall to mimic the banquet scene originally rendered there in paint⁷⁸. Painted remains of the *kylekeion* survive on the adjoining wall. Two blond-haired, nude⁷⁹ young men, one with wings, appear to be acting as cupbearers to the simulated banquet happening in front of them [*Fig. 15*].

Ridgway interprets these scenes as happy occasions in which the family engages in an eternal banquet in the Underworld, presided over by winged “demons”⁸⁰. She agrees that on the surface this vision of the Underworld is radically different from the scenes of dancing, *ludi*, and erotic pleasure depicted on the walls of tombs from the Archaic era⁸¹. However, these later narratives still communicate continuity with earlier iconographic traditions. They foster a conception of the afterlife free from punishment and devoid of judgment. Charu(n), like Vanth, is present not to torment the deceased, but rather to guide and protect them.

⁷⁷ Steingraber 2006, 207.

⁷⁸ Ridgway 2007, 131.

⁷⁹ Bonfante (1996, 155) argues that depictions of nudity in Etruscan art were “closely related to death.” Her interpretation is based on the belief that nudity had an apotropaic function, protecting the living and the dead from the “Evil Eye.”

⁸⁰ Ridgway 2007, 128-131.

⁸¹ See Steingraber 2006 for the *Tomb of the Triclinium* (136), *Tomb of the Augurs* (92), *Tomb of the Whipping* (67), and *Tomb of the Bulls* (91).

Proceeding into *Orcus II*, we encounter the rare depiction of the Etruscan winged “demon,” Tuchulcha [*Figs. 3 and 16*]. In addition to its unique physiognomy, snakes sprout from the figure’s head, and unfurl from its wings (which match the same diamond-shaped pattern we just noted on Charu(n)’s wings). Tuchulcha’s gender is somewhat ambiguous in this depiction. The figure wears a woman’s garment, similar to a *peplos*, that hints at the presence of female breasts⁸². Tuchulcha’s skin color is a pale orange that matches the patch on the interior of the wings⁸³. The pale orange is in stark contrast to Theseus’s dark reddish brown skin tone, that leaves no doubt as to the hero’s gender. The aforementioned serpent is being used to menace both Theseus and Peirithoos, who have broken the laws of nature, daring to enter the Underworld as mortals, where they plan to kidnap Phersepnai (Persephone). Properly contextualizing this as a breach in the fabric between the living and the dead helps us to accurately interpret Tuchulcha’s function in the scene. Rather than another example of an alleged new and terrifying view of the Underworld, many scholars now believe that Tuchulcha functioned in a manner that was meant to protect the “cosmic order” of the universe⁸⁴. This interpretation bears fruit and is consistent with the narrative context we find Tuchulcha in on a mid-fourth century BCE Etruscan red-figure volute krater from Vulci.

On one side of the Vulcian krater, the Greek myth of Alcestis and Admetus is depicted in an “Etruscanised” manner⁸⁵ [*Fig. 17*]. Flanking the figure of husband and wife are two “demons” identifiable by their attributes. To the left of Alcestis, the figure of

⁸² De Grummond 2005, 218.

⁸³ This is based off of my own observations and is supported by De Grummond 2006, 218.

⁸⁴ See De Grummond (2005); Ridgway (2007); and Pieraccini and Del Chiaro (2013).

⁸⁵ Pieraccini and Del Chiaro 2013, 304. The term “Etruscanised” refers to the manner in which Etruscans adopted and adapted Greek myths by inserting distinctly Etruscan visual elements (such as winged Underworld figures) into them, thus making these myths their own.

Charu(n) is clearly depicted. Although this version of the figure is wingless, he carries his attributive mallet. On the right, flanking Admetus, Pieraccini and Del Chiaro convincingly argue that the winged “demon” we see rendered is in fact Tuchulcha⁸⁶. Not only do we recognize Tuchulcha’s unique physiognomy, but he⁸⁷ also brandishes the same snakes we saw in *Orcus II*. Aside from his attributes, however, the interpretation is based on the ideological purpose that Tuchulcha appears to fulfill in the narrative. Pieraccini and Del Chiaro write, “Admetus was meant to die, but here escaped death – an event that clearly disrupted the order of the [U]nderworld”⁸⁸. Thus, Tuchulcha’s presence at Admetus’s side, menacing him with snakes (of the Underworld), not only attempts to set right this disruption to the cosmic order, it also creates an entirely new and purely Etruscan context to a Greek myth, adopted and adapted to fit the needs of an Etruscan funerary ideology. Furthermore, while the image of Tuchulcha might be new, the figure’s function of maintaining the cosmic order between the living and the dead is an ancient theme we have already traced back to the early Archaic era in the *Tomb of the Panthers*, and the *Tomb of San Andrea* before that.

Overall, the *Tomb of the Orcus* is not representative of a depression visited on Etruria during the fourth and third centuries. While the mood may not be optimistic, neither is it dark and brooding. While clouds of the Underworld swirl around the figures in this grand sepulchre, the level of detail and of cultural capital the artist achieved on behalf of his patron is striking. This vision of the Underworld is bold, and the presence of so many winged figures is exhilarating. Here the principle of family unity where the clan will forever

⁸⁶ 2013, 306-307.

⁸⁷ In this rendering, Pieraccini and Del Chiaro argue the figure is definitively more masculine in appearance.

⁸⁸ Pieraccini and Del Chiaro 2013, 207.

be gathered in the presence of heroes from Homeric legend is emphasized. Inserted into the painted vignettes from Greek legend, Charu(n), Tuchulcha, and the as yet identified winged figures whose images have been lost, redefine these Hellenic myths to fit within the bounds of Etruscan funerary practice and ideology. Rather than create a new ideology, the Greek elements are absorbed into the funerary ideologies represented by our purely Etruscan winged Underworld figures. We even see the return of the banquet as winged Charu(n) figures keep a watchful eye over the deceased family as they recline together triumphant over death, or at least the fear associated with dying.

Late Period (325/300-1st century BCE)

As the third century BCE dawns in Etruria, the appearance of winged Underworld figures reaches a fever pitch. For roughly the next one hundred and fifty years, winged “demons” will dominate funerary iconography, symbolically imbued with over five centuries of Etruscan funerary ideology. This, for sure, is the era of Charu(n) and Vanth, and an opportunity to come full circle in our discussion. From the earliest phases of Etruscan art, the ideological need to protect and care for the deceased as they made their way into the afterlife and beyond, found expression in a variety of iconographic narratives and themes. This need does not diminish in later phases of Etruscan art. Additional comparanda continues to support our argument.

The third century BCE *Tomb of the Charuns* [Fig. 18] at Tarquinia beautifully illustrates the now familiar theme of symmetrically placed figures flanking the sides of painted false doors. Two doors, to be precise, are each flanked by a pair of winged Charu(n) figures – four in all, each identified by inscription. De Grummond notes the presence of a

byname in three of the four inscriptions⁸⁹, raising the issue of whether the name Charu(n) should be thought of generically⁹⁰. We will see this issue come up with Vanth as well in a moment. For now, we note that each figure is not a carbon copy of its neighbor. Endowed with attributes that include Charu(n)’s customary blue skin, one of the figures also sports the appearance of black pock marks – perhaps representative of decomposition. We note a second Charu(n) carrying a sword (a rare depiction) in his right hand, while wielding the more customary mallet in his left. His orange colored tunic contrasts with that of the Charu(n) with whom he shares custody of the door. A mantle of dark bluish-green feathers accents the brown tunic on this adjacent figure. He carries an ax in his left hand. Snakes writhe in the figures’ hair (which includes blond for at least two figures), and each wears the customary hunting boots we would expect to see. The pair that flanks the second door is not as well preserved. In all, these four figures leave no doubt as to the role Charu(n) played as gatekeeper to the Underworld. And Ridgway rightfully notes antecedents in, among other examples, the pair of boxers that flank the entrance in the Archaic era *Tomb Cardarelli* at Tarquinia⁹¹.

A tomb dated to the first quarter of the third century BCE at Tarquinia, the *Anina Family Tomb*, features two nearly life size painted figures flanking its entrance wall. On the right, identified by inscription, is Charu(n) [*Fig. 19*]. On the left, also identified by inscription, is his female counterpart, Vanth [*Fig. 20*]. Both figures face the doorway ready to confront anyone entering or leaving the tomb [*Fig. 21*]. Charu(n) has his mallet, perhaps to menace any would-be tomb robbers, while our Underworld goddess Vanth with breasts

⁸⁹ The fourth figure likely had a byname as well, but the inscription for this figure is incomplete.

⁹⁰ De Grummond 2005, 214-215.

⁹¹ 2007, 133.

exposed, carries the torch that will light the darkness underground. The tomb illustrates the harmony with which the pair operates. One guards, while the other guides. Antecedents for these figures can be found in the sixth century *Tomb of the Augurs*⁹² [Fig. 22] at Tarquinia, in addition to the aforementioned examples.

As Etruscan tomb painting is thought to draw to a close around 275 BCE⁹³, stone sarcophagi with carved relief panels featuring winged Underworld figures fill the void. Tarquinia alone preserves dozens of such sarcophagi. Like the banquet scenes that became conventional centuries before, so too are the scenes of the deceased being led either on horseback, in chariots, or even wagons by Charu(n), often with Vanth bookending the funerary procession, torch in hand [Fig. 23]. The familiar theme of the journey and the role of *psychopompoi* in the guise of winged “demons” are the emphasis of many of these Late Period sarcophagi⁹⁴.

Of special note is a second century BCE sarcophagus of a woman, Hasti Agunei, from Chiusi with no less than three female Underworld figures carved in stone relief [Fig. 24]. Inscriptions above the figures provide us with two of their names. The figure farthest to the left is labeled “*Culsu.*” She emerges from the partially opened doorway to the Underworld. She holds a torch, and wears the customary short skirt and high leather hunting boots. Her breasts are exposed, and she is devoid of wings. To her immediate left is Vanth, as her inscription denotes. She is depicted with an enormous key or bolt that must bear some

⁹² Ridgway (2007, 133) notes that the pair of priests that flank the painted false door on the back wall of the tomb strike a posture that may suggest their presence as guardians or keepers of the symbolic portal to the Underworld.

⁹³ Ridgway (2003, 11) is adamant that tomb painting in Etruria came to an end in the first quarter of the third century BCE.

⁹⁴ One of the rare depictions of winged Underworld figures to survive from ancient Caere is displayed at the Museo Nazionale Cerite. Two large panel fragments from what appears to have been the side of a sarcophagus depict at least five Underworld figures, three of which have wings.

relationship to the door she stands in close proximity to. Vanth here is also wearing her characteristic short skirt and hunting boots, and her breasts are exposed as well. A third figure, whose inscription does not survive, balances the scene on the right. This “Vanth-like” figure⁹⁵ (identified as we would expect by her attributive short skirt, hunting boots, exposed breasts, and, in this instance, by wings) has taken the deceased gently by the arm and is about to lead her towards the two figures on the far left and door to the Underworld. The woman’s relatives stand between her and the door to the Underworld waiting to bid her final farewell.

Here in one complex narrative we have three female Underworld figures, two of which are clearly associated with the door to the Underworld, and the means to open and close that door. The label *Culsu*, Jannot argues, is not so much a proper name, as a word that describes someone “in charge of a door”⁹⁶. Like the bynames we just observed for our multiple Charu(n) figures in the *Tomb of the Charuns*, the “generic-like”⁹⁷ label here seems to emphasize function as well as form. I am not the first to wonder whether the plurality we observe in Vanth and Charu(n) may, in part, be explained by regional differences throughout Etruria in the way these figures were originally conceived of. Perhaps the red-haired female Underworld figure from the late fourth century BCE *Tomb of the Infernal Quadriga* at Sarteano is a regional variant on the more familiar Charu(n) figures that Tarquinian tombs have preserved in greater abundance. Further investigations will no doubt help to provide us with fresh perspectives.

⁹⁵ De Grummond 2005, 222-223.

⁹⁶ Jannot 2006, 64.

⁹⁷ De Grummond 2006, 224.

Variations in the role of Charu(n) and Vanth are noted in the late fourth century BCE *Francois Tomb* at Vulci [Fig. 25]. Here winged Vanth is dressed rather more modestly (by modern standards), her breasts covered and in a full length, pleated garment. She holds a scroll, rather than a torch, as she witnesses the bloody sacrifice of the Trojan prisoners by Achilles. A wingless Charu(n) stands opposite her, glaring down at a mortally wounded prisoner. Reminiscent of the “Etruscanized” Homeric legends in the *Tomb of the Orcus*, the insertion of winged (and non-winged) Underworld figures in the *Francois Tomb* also creates a new narrative that is completely Etruscan in context. This raises a final point.

Peter Holliday has written extensively on narrative performance as part of Etruscan and later Roman funerary rituals⁹⁸. The ritualistic nature of bloodletting so graphically portrayed in the *Francois Tomb*, draws strong parallels with the bloody Phersu game from the last third of the sixth century in the *Tomb of the Augurs* at Tarquinia. The practice is thought to have a connection to later Roman gladiatorial contests. While we need always be vigilant about keeping Etruscan contexts separate from Roman (as well as Greek) contexts, we are correct to assume that Rome adopted at least some Etruscan funerary ideologies in the centuries preceding Roman conquest. Those ideologies that were concerned with the care, protection, and immortality of the deceased would have been especially attractive⁹⁹. We know for certain that the Romans coopted Etruscan religious and civic symbols of power such as the *lituus*, and *sella curulis*. It follows, then, that the Romans would have borrowed ideologies around death and the afterlife from the Etruscans as well. Continuity of this kind has only just begun to be studied in matters relating to iconographic

⁹⁸ See 1993, 175; and 2002, 128 for discussion.

⁹⁹ Holliday (2002, 128) writes, “The survival of the soul was an ancient, and deep-seated belief in Italy.”

antecedents between Etruscan tomb painting and later Roman wall painting¹⁰⁰. For now we may legitimately ask – who conquered whom?

Conclusion

We must bear in mind that the subject matter on painted tomb walls, as well as on painted vases, and stone sarcophagi, were deeply personal choices. Made either by the deceased before their death, or by the family afterwards, the iconography selected no doubt was meant to convey as symbolically potent a message as possible. It is worth remembering that the images from painted tombs, specifically, were never meant for public consumption, and that these tombs were rarely, if ever, reentered. We must ask ourselves what sort of cultural capital was there to be gained by the deceased and their kin by selecting the iconography of winged Underworld figures?

To some extent we can try, as this study has, to explain the popularization of “demon” iconography in the Middle and Late Periods as a continuing commitment to the traditional religious and funerary ideologies from the distant past. Ritualistic beliefs and potent Underworld figures populated the lids of ash urns from the eighth century¹⁰¹. Inscribed votive offerings to Vanth are found in tomb assemblages beginning in the last decades of the seventh century BCE, with similar inscriptions to Charu(n) following a century behind. Iconographic innovations during the late Orientalizing and early Archaic eras of rampant predatory felines, painted false doors, symmetrically placed figures flanking real and painted doorways, and hippocampi serving as *psychopompoi* for the deceased, captured the Etruscan’s imagination until the transitional fifth century.

¹⁰⁰ Pieraccini (2014) is a leading voice in this discussion.

¹⁰¹ The Bisenzio ash urn, ca. 725 BCE (see De Grummond 2005, fig. I.2).

I have argued above that it was precisely because the threat of change loomed so large during this period of “crisis” that the Etruscans were drawn to the chthonic figures of their ancestors. In these winged Underworld figures I believe they not only maintained continuity with traditional beliefs, they may even have fortified those belief systems.

Providing comfort not just for the deceased, but more importantly, for those left behind to grieve the loss, had to have been a chief concern. In this way, winged Underworld figures would have been ideal. Their abundance in the Late Period certainly suggests this was the case. Likely conceived of native Etruscan mythological traditions (now lost), these winged figures represented traditional religious belief systems and funerary ideologies. Comfort was found through connection with the past. And nowhere was this more readily apparent for the Etruscans than in the deeply respected funerary sphere. Their vast necropoleis stand as visible reminders of this truth. We have only the faintest glimpse into how the Etruscan Underworld might have been perceived. The *Tomb of the Orcus* offers us one such vision. The *Tomb of the Blue Demons* suggests that it could be treacherous at times to navigate. Charu(n) with his mallet, and Vanth with her torch were the deceased’s friends and allies. That thought must have been of great comfort to the family left grieving the loss of a loved one.

Unlocking the mysteries to the Etruscan afterlife, as Krauskopf notes, has been especially challenging given the emotionally charged and deeply personal rituals that are often associated with death and burial¹⁰². Whatever the case, a rich cultural heritage that included not just a vast corpus of religious and funerary texts, but certainly an extensive pantheon of native Etruscan deities, nourished the Etruscan spirit in life, just as it did in the

¹⁰² 2006, 66.

afterlife. Within this eternal cycle of life, death, and rebirth, Etruscan winged Underworld figures played a vital role.

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APPENDIX A:
Chronological Listing of Winged Underworld Figures in Etruria

1. Vanth inscription on piriform aryballos from Marsiliana D’Albegna (Vulci), end of the seventh century BCE.
2. “Master of Birds” on Etrusco-Corinthian alabastron from Vulci, ca. 630-580 BCE.
3. *Tomb of the Panthers* at Tarquinia, ca. 600 BCE.
4. Bronze “demoness” figure holding a gilded bird from *Tomb of “Isis”* from Vulci, ca. 600-575 BCE.
5. Caeretan terracotta brazier with cylinder stamp around rim with winged male figure depicted from ancient Caere, ca. 575-500 BCE.
6. Charu(n) inscription on foot of black glazed bowl from Valle Pega Necropolis at Spina, ca. 530-520 BCE.
7. Etruscan black-figure stamnos with winged male Underworld figure from Vulci, early fifth century BCE.
8. Bird headed “demon” on a black-figure pottery sherd, provenience unknown, early fifth century BCE.
9. Scarab seal, provenience unknown, early fifth century BCE.
10. *Tomb of the Blue Demons* at Tarquinia, ca. 400 BCE.
11. *Tomb of the Maiden* at Tarquinia, end of the fifth century BCE.
12. “Vanth” Group – collection of red-figure pottery featuring depictions of Vanth and Charu(n) in their usual roles of guiding and guarding from Orvieto, ca. fourth century BCE.
13. *Golini I Tomb* at Orvieto, mid-fourth century BCE.
14. Etruscan red-figure volute krater with Charu(n) and Tuchulcha inserted into Greek myth of Alcestis and Admetus from Vulci, ca. 350 BCE.
15. Etruscan red-figure vase with Charu(n) and Amazons from Vulci, ca. fourth century BCE.
16. Grave stelae group from Bologna, fourth century BCE.
17. *Golini II Tomb* at Orvieto, third quarter of fourth century BCE.
18. *Tomb of the Orcus* at Tarquinia, second third of fourth century BCE.
19. *Francois Tomb* at Vulci, third quarter of fourth century BCE.
20. *Tomb of the Shields* at Tarquinia, third quarter of fourth century BCE.
21. *Tomb of the Infernal Quadriga* at Sarteano, end of the fourth century BCE.
22. *Hescanas Tomb* at Orvieto, end of the fourth century BCE.
23. Stone relief panel (sarcophagus?) from ancient Caere, end of the fourth century BCE.
24. *Anina Family Tomb* at Tarquinia, third century BCE.
25. *Tomb of the Garlands* at Tarquinia, 270 BCE.
26. *Tomb of the Cardinal* at Tarquinia, first half of the third century BCE.
27. *Tomb of the Charuns* at Tarquinia, second quarter of the third century BCE.
28. *Tomb 5636* at Tarquinia, third century BCE.
29. *Tomb of the Typhon* at Tarquinia, end of the third century BCE.
30. Sarcophagus of Hasti Afunei from Chiusi, third century BCE.
31. Sarcophagus of Laris Pulenas from Tarquinia, third century BCE.
32. Terracotta ash urn group from Chiusian territory, second century BCE.

APPENDIX B: IMAGES



Fig. 1 Charu(n) flanks the left hand side of the entrance wall in the *Anina Family Tomb*, at Tarquinia, ca. third century BCE. (Photo: author).

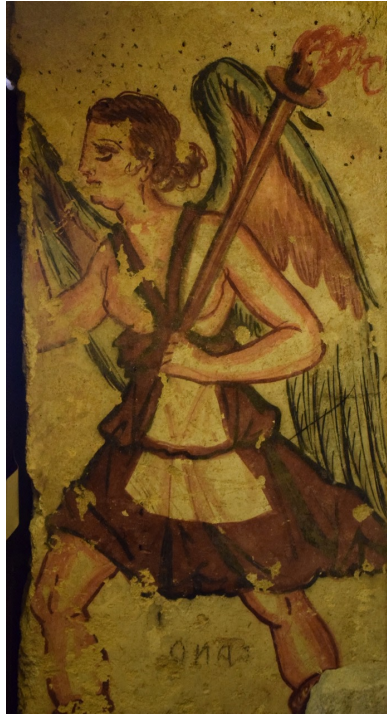


Fig. 2 Opposite Charu(n), Vanth flanks the right hand side of the entrance wall in the *Anina Family Tomb* at Tarquinia, ca. third century BCE. (Photo: author).



Fig. 3 Tuchulcha menaces Theseus and Peirithoos in the Underworld with a snake. *Tomb of the Orcus II*, Tarquinia, ca. 330 BCE. (Photo: author).



Fig. 4 Continuous frieze in the *Tomb of the Blue Demons* at Tarquinia, ca. 400 BCE. The narrative on the right wall of the tomb depicts a deceased woman's journey through the Underworld along with the presence of four Underworld figures. (Photo: author).



Fig. 5 Detail of head from black-skinned winged "demon." *Tomb of the Blue Demons*, Tarquinia, ca. 400 BCE. (Photo: author).



Fig. 6 A blue-skinned Underworld figure brandishing snakes confronts a black-skinned winged "demon" at the threshold to the Underworld. *Tomb of the Blue Demons*, Tarquinia, ca. 400 BCE. (Photo: author).



Fig. 7 Escorted by two Underworld figures (blue-skinned and reddish brown-skinned), the protagonist in the scene, a deceased woman (pleated skirt still visible) meets her waiting kin (left) in the Underworld. *Tomb of the Blue Demons*, Tarquinia, ca. 400 BCE. (Photo: author).



Fig. 8 A boat with an oarsman (left) waits to carry the deceased (not pictured) and her kin into the afterlife. *Tomb of the Blue Demons*, Tarquinia, ca. 400 BCE. (Photo: author).



Fig. 9 Detail of blue-skinned demon brandishing bearded snakes. *Tomb of the Blue Demons*, Tarquinia, ca. 400 BCE. (Photo: author).



Fig. 10 Etruscan scarab depicting winged demons leading a youth to the Underworld, provenience unknown, early fifth century BCE. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. 21.1198. (Photo: Scarrone 2011, Fig. 10).



Fig. 11 Funerary stele from Bologna, mid-fifth century BCE. Archaeological Museum of Bologna. (Photo from museum's website).



Fig. 12 Two heraldic panthers decorate the upper portion of the back wall of the *Tomb of the Panthers*, Tarquinia, ca. 600 BCE. Note the wings that decorate the top of each feline's head. (Photo: Steingraber 2006, 61).

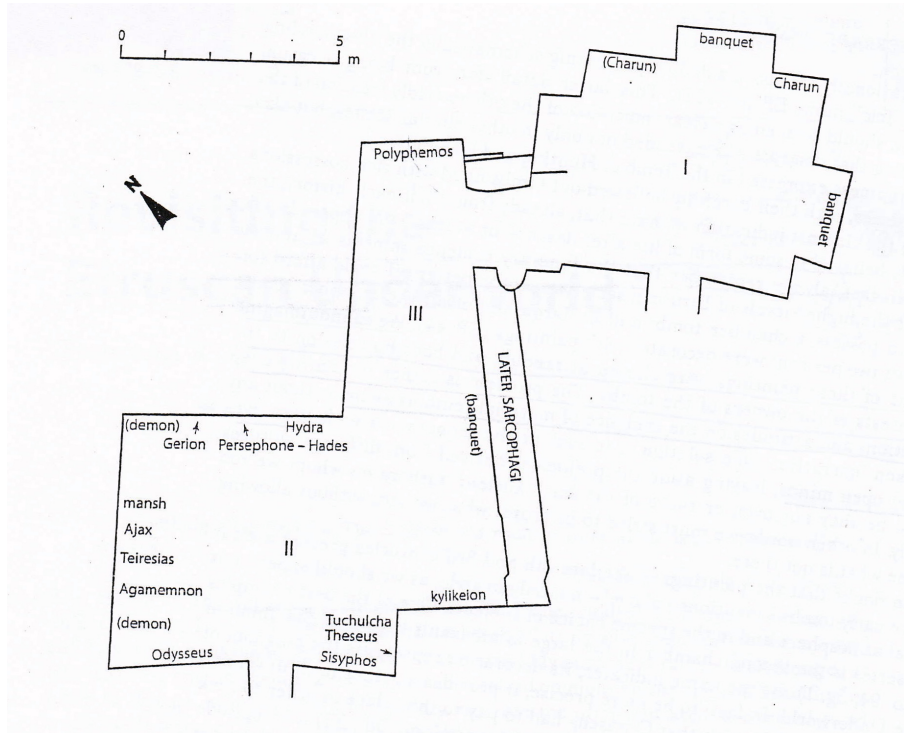


Fig. 13 Plan of the *Tomb of the Orcus I, II, and III* showing the position of the paintings, at Tarquinia, ca. 330-300 BCE. (Ridgway 2007, Fig. 1).



Fig. 14 Charu(n) flanks the right hand wall of a *loculus* where fragments of a painted banquet scene are just barely visible. *Tomb of the Orcus I*, Tarquinia, ca. 330 BCE. (Photo: author).



Fig. 15 *Kylekeion* along with two nude Underworld figures (one with wings) serving as cupbearers. *Tomb of the Orcus II*, Tarquinia, ca. 330 BCE. (Photo: author).



Fig. 16 Detail of *Tuchulcha* with serpent menacing *Theseus* in the Underworld. *Tomb of the Orcus II*, Tarquinia, ca. 330-300 BCE. (Photo: author).



Fig. 17 Red-figure volute krater depicting the “Etruscanised” myth of Alcestis and Admetus. The Underworld figure, Charu(n) (left), can be identified by the mallet he carries. The winged Underworld figure, Tuchulcha (right), is identified by his unique physiognomy and the role he appears to be serving in maintaining cosmic order. Vulci, ca. 350 BCE. (Photo: Martelli 1987, pl. 222).



Fig. 18 Two Charu(n) figures, identified by inscription, flank one of two painted false doors in the *Tomb of the Charuns* at Tarquinia, third century BCE. (Photo: author)



Fig. 19 Detail of Charu(n)'s head in profile from the *Anina Family Tomb* at Tarquinia, third century BCE. (Photo: author).

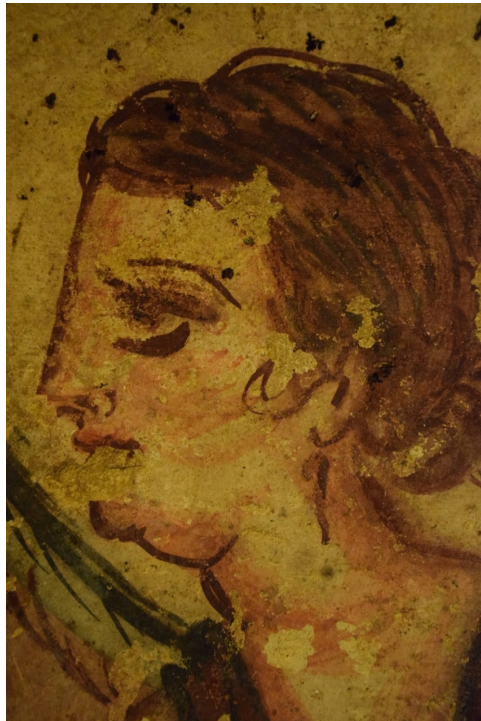


Fig. 20 Detail of Vanth's head in profile from the *Anina Family Tomb* at Tarquinia, third century BCE. (Photo: author)



Fig. 21 Charu(n) guards, Vanth guides as they flank the doorway on the inside wall of the *Anina Family Tomb* at Tarquinia, third century BCE. (Photo: De Agostini Picture Library/Scala, Florence.)



Fig. 22 Two symmetrically placed figures flank a painted false door in the *Tomb of the Augurs* at Tarquinia, ca. 530 BCE. (Photo: author).



Fig. 23 A group of third century portrait-type stone sarcophagi in the Archaeological Museum at Tarquinia. Escorted by Charu(n) (center figure holding mallet), the deceased (on horseback) makes his way into the Underworld. Two Vanth figures (far right and left) fulfill the role of *psychopompoi*, lighting the way through the Underworld with their torches raised high. (Photo: author).

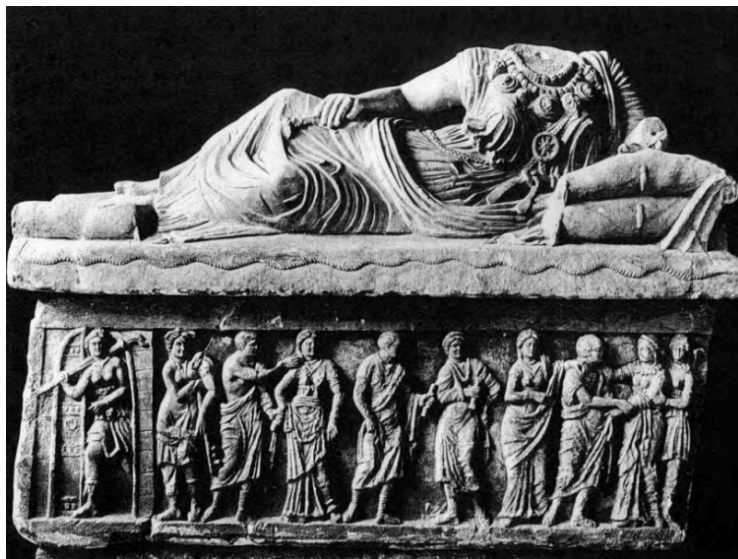


Fig. 24 Sarcophagus of Hasti Afunei from Chiusi, second century BCE. Culsu (far left) emerges from the door to the Underworld, torch slung over her shoulder. Next to her leaning an enormous key is a wingless Vanth figure. Another winged Vanth figure (far right) gently guides the deceased as she bids farewell to family members. (Photo: Archäologisches Institut der Universität Heidelberg).



Fig. 25 A Trojan prisoner is sacrificed by Achilles while the shade of Patroklos looks on. Inserted into this Homeric myth are winged Vanth, who holds a scroll, and a wingless Charu(n), whom we can identify by his blue skin and mallet. They appear to be functioning in the scene as witnesses to the slaughter. *Francois Tomb*, Vulci, last quarter of fourth century BCE. (Photo: *Les Grands Siecles De La Peinture - La Peinture Étrusque*, p. 115).