Etruscan Rock-cut Tombs: Origins, Characteristics, Local and Foreign Elements

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This very modest ‘alpnu’ in honour of Sybille Haynes’ 80th birthday seeks to emphasize the importance of a unique phenomenon – the rock tombs – that characterize the inner part of Southern Etruria, today called Tuscia.

To begin: two completely different quotations concerning the area of Etruscan rock tombs:

“It is a spot which should not fail to be visited by everyone who feels interest in the antiquities of early Italy (Dennis 1848, 244, on Norchia).

Uno dei territori più singolari e suggestivi dell’Italia centrale è senza dubbio la zona delle necropoli rupestri dell’Etruria meridionale interna. L’incontro fra l’opera umana, con le sue forme evocatrici ed i suoi tagli a volte immani, e la materia naturale così lavorata; il fascino selvaggio dei luoghi, ancora in parte (ma per quanto?) vergini, e il contrasto cromatico tra la vegetazione e i rossi vivi e i grigi caldi del tufo; l’impressione di fantastici miraggi di città del passato che sembrano sorgere tra le macchie dall’addensarsi delle sagome delle tombe intagliate: tutto questo rappresenta una delle più tipiche manifestazioni di simbiosi fra archeologia e paesaggio, che si conoscono nella nostra penisola (Pallottino 1970, 9).”

One of the most unusual and picturesque regions of central Italy is without doubt the zone of the rock necropoies of inland southern Etruria. The meeting of human work – with its evocative forms and its sometimes huge gouges – and the natural material thus worked; the wild fascination of the places, still (but for how long?) partly virgin; and the chromatic contrast between the vegetation and the vivid reds and warm greys of the tufa; the impression of fantastic mirages of the ancient cities which seem to rise up among the macchia from the thickening shapes of the carved tombs: all this represents one of the most typical manifestations of symbiosis between archaeology and landscape that is known on our peninsula.

The so-called rock tombs in the southern Etruscan inland zone constitute undoubtedly one of the most characteristic and impressive groups of Etruscan architecture for which there is no parallel in Italy in quantity, monumentality, or variety of types. On the other hand, the phenomenon of rock tomb architecture was also common in several other cultural areas of the Mediterranean, especially in south-west Asia Minor.

The geographical and geological situation is, of course, the fundamental precondition for the origin of rock-cut tombs. Normally they occur in landscapes of volcanic origin with deep ravines and steep cliffs, as is the case in the hinterland of southern Etruria (mainly the Province of Viterbo), with its pastoral landscape, its distinctive reddish volcanic tufa stone, its deep canyon-like valleys, its high plateaux with mostly naturally defended settlements, and its several crater lakes.

The distribution of rock tombs extends from the eastern edges of the Tuffa mountains around Stigliano in the south, to southwestern Tuscany around Sovana in the north, with the main centres in Blera, San Giuliano, Tuscania, Norchia, Castel d’Asso and Sovana. There are also rock-cut tombs in the Faliscan area and – a really exceptional case – in Populonia (Necropoli delle Grotte) where a former quarry was reused as a necropolis.

The beginnings of southern Etruscan rock-cut tomb architecture go back to the second quarter of the 6th century bc, while the most recent examples date from the 3rd or early 2nd century ac. This phenomenon reached its zenith in the later Archaic and early Hellenistic periods. During the first flourishing, the most numerous and interesting rock tombs were situated more in the south around Blera and San Giuliano, an area that belonged to the sphere of political influence of Cerveteri, and in Tuscania, which was part of the hinterland of Tarquinia. The most important rock tombs of the second high point can be found more to the north, at Norchia, Castel d’Asso, and Sovana, in the areas of influence, respectively, of Tarquinia and Vulci.

Chronologically one can divide research into southern Etruscan rock-cut tombs into three main periods:

1. 19th century: Dennis; Canina; Orioli; Labrouste and Lenoir.
2. Between the First and Second World Wars: Koch, von Mercklin and Weickert (Blera); Bianchi Bandinelli (Sovana); Gargana (San Giuliano) and Rosi.
3. Since the 1960s: Swedish King Gustav VI Adolf (San Giovenale and Luni sul Mignone); G. and E. Colonna (Castel d’Asso and Norchia); Quilici (Blera and Tuscania); Maggiani (Sovana); Sgubini Moretti (Tuscania); general discussion by Oleson; Romanelli; and Steingräber.

One can divide the southern Etruscan rock tombs into several types and variants according to geographic distribution, chronology, and size. The spectrum ranges from simple chambers, loculi and niches cut into the tufa rock, without elaborate facades, to very splendid temple-shaped rock monuments. The so-called tomba a dado (cube tomb) is the most common type from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period. Among the other types to be discussed are the house tomb (6th to 3rd century), the Archaic portico tomb (second half of 6th century, only in San Giuliano), the Hellenistic temple and portico tomb (Norchia and Sovana), the Hellenistic aedicula tomb (mainly Sovana) and the Hellenistic tholos tomb (only Sovana).

In general one can say that the main emphasis in rock tomb architecture was on the outward appearance, that is on the monument and the façade and not so much on the tomb chamber and the burial gifts. Only in very few cases were the walls of the tomb chambers painted (two examples in Blera) or distinguished by coffered ceilings (as in Sovana). During the development of Etruscan rock-cut tomb architecture the façade gained in importance at the expense of the tomb chamber or burial, which from the 4th century was transferred to beneath the façade and was worked less precisely. The tomb façades – or their details, at least – were originally stuccoed and painted, with inscriptions relatively rare (they are found at Castel d’Asso (Colonna di Paolo and Colonna 1970). One of the most characteristic elements – especially of the cube tombs – is the...
so-called *porta dorica*, which in the 6th and 5th century still forms the real entrance to the tomb chamber. During the 4th century it becomes a mere false door, obviously with a symbolic significance. Some elements of the rock tombs, such as the platforms with mouldings and lateral stairs on cube tombs, served mainly for the purposes of the cult of the dead. These platforms are formally and functionally comparable to altars and could serve also for *cippi* of different types and sizes. The so-called *sottofacciata* rooms, with roofs and stone benches in front of the façades of several Hellenistic cube tombs in Norchia and Castel d’Asso, were most probably intended for funeral banquets. In this context we can also cite the upper façade of the Early Hellenistic Tomba Torlonia at Cerveteri (Colonna 1986, 523).

Among the different tomb types and their decorations we find both local Etruscan and foreign innovative elements. The cube tomb, with its several variants, the house tomb and the Archaic portico tomb of San Giuliano are characteristic Etruscan types. As Colonna proposed, the cube tombs – partly carved and partly built – of the necropoleis at Cerveteri (which replaced the smaller so-called façade-tumuli during the second quarter and the middle of the 6th century) most probably served as models for the rock-cut cube tombs in the southern Etruscan hinterland (Colonna 1986, 447). On the other hand, the monumental and expensive temple and portico tombs of the Hellenistic period are inconceivable without foreign models and influences (*tombe doriche* and the Tomba Lattanzi at Norchia; the Tomba Ildebranda and the Tomba Pola at Sovana). In their general conception and ideology they primarily recall the mausoleum and *heroon* tradition in Asia Minor (Oleson 1982, 63–6, 88–96), whilst for the details of the rich decoration and reliefs we can recognize prototypes particularly in southern Italy and Apulia (the scroll and vegetal friezes and figured capitals). Other forms of relief decoration on façades are found on the following: Tomba di Tre Teste and Tomba del Caronte at Norchia; Tomba della Maschera at San Giuliano; *tombe doriche* at Norchia (pediments with relief sculptures, back wall with relief frieze); Tomba Lattanzi at Norchia and Tomba Ildebranda at Sovana with relief friezes (and according to Maggiani’s reconstruction with three pediments: Steingräber 1996, 94). Of special interest is the originally painted relief frieze on the back wall behind the former portico of the Tombe doriche in Norchia which shows a procession with dignitaries and winged demons, which compares well with the iconography of the painted scene on the right wall of the Tomba del Tifone in Tarquinia, as well as elements of a weapon frieze comparable to the wall paintings of the Tomba Giglioli in Tarquinia and other tomb paintings in

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**Figure 1** Blera, Necropoli Pian del Vescovo: archaic house shaped tomb. Photo: the author

**Figure 2** San Giuliano, Necropoli del Caiolo: archaic portico tombs. Photo: the author
southern Italy (at Paestum and Egnazia), Macedonia and Thrace (Steingräber 2006a, 253–4). In addition we know of a series of head protomes in stone whose original architectural context unfortunately we cannot reconstruct (Steingräber 2006b).

The topographical arrangement and organization of the larger rock tomb necropoleis were not accidental but an expression of an intentional, rational use of space and of new urbanistic tendencies. The rock-cut tombs are often arranged in rows side by side and on terraces one above the other, connected by paths and stairs. They are concentrated particularly in the areas along the main entry and exit roads of the ancient city, or are situated around rectangular squares. Similar, well-known, tendencies are reflected in the rectangular system of cube tomb streets in the necropoleis of Cerveteri (Banditaccia) and Orvieto (Grocefisso del Tufo) (Colonna 1986, 447–8), which date mainly from the second half of the 6th century and precede chronologically the famous ‘Hippodamean’ street system of the north Etruscan town of Marzabotto. They can also be interpreted as a reflection of a stronger social levelling, of a more widespread prosperity, and perhaps also of a limit to sepulchral luxury.

Only a limited number of types of rock-cut tomb, ground plans, and details are borrowed from Etruscan house architecture: e.g. the house-shaped type, the ground plan of the transverse house with two or three rooms side by side (types D and E according to Prayon 1975, 23–8), or individual elements, such as the saddle roof or beds (*klinai*). Generally the discrepancy between tomb and house architecture becomes still more obvious in the later rock-cut tombs of the Hellenistic period. Influences from palace architecture (portico tomb of Pian di Mola at Tuscania: Sgubini Moretti 1986; 1989; 1991) and temple architecture (pediments of temple and aedicula tombs, and the ground plan of the Tomba Ildebranda at Sovana, *peripteros sine postico*), are also documented.

From the beginning, the phenomenon of southern Etruscan rock tomb architecture certainly was not simply determined by geological factors, but was intended to achieve scenographic and prestigious effect. This fact is reflected not least by the common, intentional, orientation of the tomb façades towards the city, to establish a permanent visual contact between the area of the living and the area of the dead. In the earliest rock-cut tomb architecture, the façade was given particular emphasis, but the relationship between the exterior architecture and the tomb chamber was still appropriate and functional, whereas from the 4th century bc this relationship completely changed in favour of a pure and often very costly false architectural façade, which neglected the subterranean, hidden, tomb chamber. Here we can observe a marked difference from the highly elaborate and decorated, partly contemporaneous, tomb chambers of Cerveteri (e.g. the Tomba dei Rilievi: Steingräber 2006a, 262–3) and Tarquinia (e.g. the Tomba Cardinale: Steingräber 2006a, 257–8). Obviously the owners of these tombs – undoubtedly belonging to the social
élite and representing a kind of landed gentry – wanted to stand out in the public eye and remain permanently in the minds of their contemporaries and descendants. Therefore the ideology of most of these tomb monuments expresses not only material prosperity and a need for admiration, but also a certain pretentiousness. This kind of ideology also reminds us of certain aspects of Roman tomb monuments, often erected in very prestigious positions along the main entry and exit roads around the towns.

A rock-cut tomb area on the western slope of Pian di Mola in Tuscania is of particular interest concerning the origins of Archaic Etruscan rock tomb architecture. It was excavated and restored in the late 1980s and early 1990s and published in brief articles by Sgubini Moretti and by the present author (Steingräber 1996, 84–90). In the centre of the area there is a large house tomb with both the front and rear façades carved almost entirely into the tufa. The portico in front with four Tuscan columns was mostly constructed from blocks and slabs of tufa and peperino in different colours with polychrome effect. The quality of the stone masonry is excellent. The tomb includes three chambers side by side. Fragments of Etruscan and Greek ceramics, faience, and a bronze lion statuette found in the tomb testify to its use from the second quarter until the end of the 6th century, that is, for three generations. The main characteristic elements are the:

- **house-shape**: documented in rock-cut tombs of Tuscania and Blera and also in urns and cippi;
- **ground plan**: corresponding to Prayon’s type D in Caeretan tomb architecture; documented also in house and palace architecture (Murlo, Acquarossa, Rome) and in sacred architecture (the templum tuscanicum);
- **lateral staircase to the portico roof**: often documented in case of cube and sometimes aedicula tombs;
- **sculptures on the column**: typical of Etruscan architecture (e.g. the palace of Murlo and the Portonaccio temple in Veii); comparable funerary stone sculptures are documented especially in Vulci;
- **cippi**: omphalos-shaped and house-shaped;
- **disc-shaped akroteria**: documented in urns and also cippi;
- **moulded Tuscan column bases**: documented in the house architecture of Acquarossa and in tomb architecture in the Caeretan and Faliscan areas (Steingräber 1996, 88);
- **porta dorica**: one real and two false doors in the façade; well documented specially in Caeretan tomb architecture;
- **interior architecture**: a beamed ceiling, saddle roof with column and kline: clear influences from Caeretan tomb architecture.

The house-shaped portico tomb at Tuscania generally belongs with the earliest rock-cut tombs in the Mediterranean area. Older rock-cut tombs or rock-cut monuments, for example those in Urartu and Phrygia, cannot be considered prototypes for typological reasons. The oldest carved portico tombs outside Etruria, such as those in Persia, Cyrenaica (Barka) and Paphlagonia, have to be dated at least several decades later. Definitely later, too, are the oldest house tombs of Lycia, which are also not typologically similar to the Etruscan examples. Still later are the Lycian and Carian temple tombs. Therefore, we have to assume that our monumental...
rock-cut tomb in Tuscania, the identity of whose owning aristocratic family is unfortunately unknown to us, was influenced mainly by local Etruscan house and palace architecture and not so much by foreign models.

We must also question whether the phenomenon of rock-cut tombs, which had been deeply rooted in some parts of Asia Minor since early times, may have given some impulse to the genesis of Etruscan rock tomb architecture, not so much in specific typology but in a more general conceptual way. Support for this hypothesis may be provided by the fact that the oldest Etruscan rock-cut tombs of the second quarter of the 6th century were not the result of a long local development, but appeared suddenly, already in a completely developed and monumentalized form.

The southern Etruscan rock-cut tomb area is also characterized by numerous other stone monuments, situated mostly in necropoleis and related to the cult of the dead. Among them we find altars, stepped monuments, tables and sacrificial slabs, thrones and cippi, and, last but not least, the peaks of tumuli and rock cube tombs, which were accessible by ramps or stairs. One of the most interesting and unusual remnants of rock-cut architecture is the rectangular base with two rows of monumental obelisk-shaped cippi beside the Cima Tumulus in San Giuliano (according to Colonna an ‘area cultuale all’aperto’ (open cult area) which I have already discussed elsewhere (Steingräber 2009).

The tradition of rock-cut tombs and rock-cut architecture also continued into Roman and Early Christian times as is shown by the many columbaria, the unique amphitheatre of Sutri and by several rock-cut churches. ‘Investing in the Afterlife’ was one of the main messages transmitted by Etruscan rock-cut tombs, but it was not the only motive. Bearing witness to the owners’ grandeur and social importance before their descendants was another.

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