

The Lotus, Poppy and other Plants in Etruscan Funerary Contexts¹

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Plants, flowers and perfumes are not strongly featured in Etruscan studies even though they are present in many paintings and reliefs.² Although the Apollonian and purifying association of the laurel have been pointed out (Simon 1973), we might still wonder about its real function. The myrtle appears several times, always in a funeral context, and especially on Caeretan hydriae. It was probably depicted for its so-called regenerative significance.³ Ivy seems to be almost everywhere, and it always denotes a Dionysiac setting (Jannot 2005). As for the pomegranate,⁴ which appears in many representations, it evokes Phersipnei (Persephone), the netherworld and related myths. A wide variety of lotus flowers and buds can be seen on numerous monuments, their omnipresence being testimony to the adoption in Etruria of Egyptian forms through Phoenician and East Greek interpretations.⁵ Finally, but scarcely evident, the poppy or, rather, the poppy seed capsule, seems to appear in a few instances and its interpretation is extremely puzzling.

The meaning and functions of all these plants obviously exist on different levels. Some have a symbolic meaning, others an emblematic or metaphoric significance, and these must be considered in a completely different way from those whose real (or supposed) pharmacological and medicinal virtues are known in antiquity. We shall attempt to investigate these uses, and to classify these plants according to what we think to be their use and purpose.

Ivy

Ivy is *par excellence* the Dionysiac plant. From the crater in the Lioness tomb to a great number of amphorae, hydriae, craters and wine jugs, in the Micali painter's production (Fig. 1) or in the so-called Pontic series, we meet ivy painted everywhere on the funeral banquet set. Some persons taking part in the symposiastic funeral banquet are crowned with ivy and we can gather from this that they probably were initiated in the



Figure 1 top view of a crater by the Micali painter. Museo Nazionale Archeologico, Florence, Inv. no. 4173 (after N. Spivey, *The Micali Painter and his Followers*, Oxford 1987)

Dionysiac mysteries. On the famous cup by Exekias,⁶ on the ship where Dionysus lies, after the departure of Tyrrhenian pirates, it is not a grapevine that is growing around the mast but ivy; as the Homeric hymn says: 'a dark ivy-plant twined about the mast, blossoming with flowers'.⁷

But we have not a single indication of eating ivy leaves or ivy flowers, nor drinking any decoction of ivy. Although we know today that it has some specific properties (vasoconstrictor, fungicide), for Cato and Varro it was mainly to be used in order to test the quality of wines.⁸ At any rate, ivy is frequently associated with grapes, and was believed to live for over 1,000 years (which is not true). Its evergreen leaves and legendary longevity alluded to an everlasting life, and this justifies its importance in a Dionysiac funeral setting.

So, ivy seems to me to have had mainly a symbolic, and perhaps mythological, significance.

Pomegranate

The most noticeable characteristic of pomegranate is its superabundance of seeds. This is obviously the reason why it became an eloquent symbol of an abundant second life. So the purpose of its presence in tombs is a little more obvious, more substantive and, perhaps, of material use. We know the importance of the pomegranate in the myth of Phersipnei/Persephone, and this justifies its presence in the funeral context.

Let us look at the typology of the pomegranate: it remains the same through at least three centuries. The fruit appears either in three-dimensional representation (Fig. 2), in high



Figure 2 Fragment of a pietra fetida relief from Chiusi of a funeral scene(?). Berlin, Staatliche Museen Inv. no. 1230 (after Jannot, 1984, B',III,2)



Figure 3 Tomba dei Tori, Tarquinia, inverted pomegranates over the scene of Achilles and Troïlos (after M. Pallottino, *La Peinture Étrusque*, Geneva, 1952, 29)

relief (usually with a snake, in an Eleusinian context), or in painting as conventionally stylised, as a pictogram, a kind of icon, or as a very simple logo in the form of a solid red or black disc with a little cross (Fig. 3). Such pomegranates are frequent in tomb painting, vase painting and even incised mirrors. The main characteristics of the fruit are readily identifiable, and there is no mistaking it for the poppy seed capsule which is stylised with a solid disc surmounted by a short, flat horizontal line.

The pomegranate itself appears on the *trapeza*/table during the funeral banquet. A relief from Chianciano (Fig. 4) and paintings from Tarquinia are our best evidence. It is offered to the banqueters, and terracotta pomegranates exist as substitutes for real ones in some Etruscan tombs, mainly in Etruscan Campania. It is also present on Etruscan jewellery where its seeds are clearly portrayed.

The pomegranate's medicinal virtues were also known to Dioscorides and Pliny.⁹ The level of interpretation seems to be mainly mythological and allusive to Persephone's destiny. But we could deduce that it is simultaneously both religious and symbolic.¹⁰ It seems to be a promise of, or at least a hope for, life after death.

Laurel (Bay)

Laurel is probably the most frequent plant ever painted or carved in the whole of Etruscan art.¹¹ Decorative as it may be, laurel is full of significance: every representation has a precise meaning. This may be evidence of an Apollo cult, as Simon proposed,¹² however it alludes clearly to ritual purification before death, and this is not associated with Apollo.

Today, laurel/bay is used in cooking and for medicinal purposes. This was also the case in antiquity, while chewing the Apollonian laurel was considered as a source of Pythian prophetic power.



Figure 4 *Cippus* of pietra fetida from Chianciano, showing banquet scene with two pomegranates on a small table, Tomba B, località la Pedata (after G. Paolucci, *Le Necropoli Etrusche di Chianciano Terme*, Montepulciano 1986, 82)

Laurel bushes surround dancers in the Tarquinian tombs; it is held in funeral banquets, in Chiusi and Tarquinia, and in some processions women walk holding laurel branches in their veiled right hand (Fig. 5). The same branches appear in many other reliefs from Chiusi.¹³

Laurel is associated with the living, the dead have no laurel branches. Crowns, palms and groves, protect the living from death's stain. This rôle derives from its mythic associations, and from the healer god Apollo/Aplu who cut laurel after purifying himself in the Tempe valley.

Lotus

Lotus is above all a wonderful flower; it becomes a splendid motif in art and throughout the ancient world we meet it everywhere: on vases, jewellery, tomb painting, and not only in a funerary context. The Etruscan lotus motif, generally consisting of flowers with buds, is widespread during the Archaic period. Can the lotus motif be considered as purely decorative? Obviously, lotus frieze borders can be simply an elegant pattern, and nothing more. However, when the lotus flower or bud is shown isolated, alone, in a very important place, or a bud or flower is held by someone, it must have a more precise significance (Fig. 6).

Originally, the Egyptian symbolism of the 'sacred lotus' (*Lotus sacra* or *Nelumbium Nelumbo*) was directly connected with Egyptian royal power and with Upper Egypt. This close relation with the Egyptian political *milieu* ceased to exist when the motif arrived in the Near East, Syria, Phoenicia and Greece. The original meaning of the Egyptian lotus cannot have been conveyed along with the motif in the Archaic Mediterranean. This flower was offered to Osiris, then to the gods, and finally to the dead: it expressed the hope of entering Osiris' kingdom. The funereal use of the lotus flower may have originated from the initial Egyptian association.

But, the word lotus/lotos (λωτος), for a Greek and consequently for an educated Etruscan, had probably at least two meanings. On the one hand it conjured up the motif (flower or bud) that came from Egypt through orientalising Greek stylisation, and on the other hand, it alluded to a well-known epic legend. The famous adventures of Ulysses' companions on the shores of the lotus-eaters' country created a new meaning. The universally known tale from the *Odyssey*



Figure 5 Part of a pietra fetida base from Chiusi, with a funeral (?) procession, with the left border in the form of a laurel branch, and women holding laurel branches. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Inv. no. 1226



Figure 6 Banquet scene, showing a banqueter with a lotus flower in his left hand, Tarquinia, Tomba 5513 (after Steingraber, 1984, Tomba 5513)



transformed the lotus flower into the ‘oblivion plant’.

They started at once, and went about among the Lotus-eaters, who did them no hurt, but gave them to eat of the lotus, which was so delicious that those who ate of it left off caring about home, and did not even want to go back and say what had happened to them, but were for staying and munching lotus with the Lotus-eaters without thinking further of their return; nevertheless, though they wept bitterly I forced them back to the ships and made them fast under the benches. Then I told the rest to go on board at once, lest any of them should taste of the lotus and leave off wanting to get home, so they took their places and smote the grey sea with their oars. (*Odyssey*, IX, 91–7; trans. Samuel Butler)

Or one can quote Tennyson:

The mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters came.
 Branches they bore of that enchanted stem,
 Laden with flower and fruit, whereof they gave
 To each, but whoso did receive of them,
 And taste, to him the gushing of the wave
 Far far away did seem to mourn and rave
 On alien shores; and if his fellow spake,
 His voice was thin, as voices from the grave;
 And deep-asleep he seem'd, yet all awake,
 And music in his ears his beating heart did make.
 (*The Lotos-Eaters*, Tennyson)

For ancient Greeks, and Etruscans too, the lotus promoted well-being, pacified and brought complete forgetfulness of difficulties and misfortune. It is, of course, a complete misassociation! The greek word *λοτος*, Latin *lotus*, designates more than 100 different plants!



Figure 7 (left) Egyptian lotus blossom; **Figure 8 (right)** *Lotus lotofagorum*, one of the many plants designated by the term lotus but completely different from the Egyptian lotus



Figure 9 Cylindrical travertine column base from Chiusi, MN. 2248. A young girl is holding a crown, near a strange plant with ‘lotos’ blossoms. Behind her, a woman is holding a lotus flower in her left hand. The whole scene is probably connected with funeral dancing ceremonies. Drawing: the author

Botanists today consider that the ‘lotos’ of the Lotus eaters was the ‘jujube tree’ known under the names of *Rhamnus lotus*, *Lotus africanus*, *Lotophagorum arbir*, *Lotus sine nucleo*, *Zizyphus lotus*. It was a small tree very like the Indian *Varadi*, whose pharmacological use is similar. In Africa, in India and in traditional Chinese medicine, it is used against insomnia, moral suffering and nervous breakdown.¹⁴

It is impossible to confuse the water-lily-like Egyptian lotus (*Lotus sacra* or *Nelumbium Nelumbo*) (Fig. 7), whose stylised representation is so widespread, with the *lotus lotofagorum*, whose form (Fig. 8), is of no artistic interest.

One must observe that the Egyptian lotus, in Etruscan representations, is absolutely unrealistic, completely stylised, and it seems probable that no Etruscan painter had ever seen a single lotus flower. Botanists think that the presence of the Egyptian lotus in Italy is highly improbable before the 15th century AD. They also believe that the *lotus lotofagorum* did not appear in Italy before the Middle Ages.¹⁵

On a relief from Chiusi, a young girl goes to pick an Egyptian lotus-like flower from a small tree (Fig. 9), while the lady behind her is holding a perfectly Egyptian-looking stylised



Figure 10 Tomba del Triclinio, Tarquinia. A banqueter at a funeral banquet holds a lotus bud. Tracing by C. Ruspi, (DAI Rome), after H. Blanck and C. Weber-Lehmann, *Malerei der Etrusker*, Mainz 1987, Abb. 118



Figure 11 Funeral cippus in form of a lotus bud. Cippus no. 3, eastern cemetery Marzabotto, Museo Nazionale Etrusco ‘Pompeo Aria’



Figure 12 Section of a poppy-capsule showing seeds



Figure 13 Corinthian aryballos (perfumed oil flask), found in Cerveteri. The decoration includes a lotus quatrefoil bud and a flat daisy-pattern collar, double allusion to the forgetting virtue of the lotus and the well-being power of the poppies. Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts, coll. Campana, inv. no. D 863.1.7



Figure 14 Corinthian aryballos in the form of a poppy capsule, found in south Etruria, 6th century. Musée du Louvre, inv. no. CA4508



Figure 15 Rhodian earthenware aryballos found in Italy, in the form and colour of a notched capsule. The notching method seems typical of the archaic period. Basel, Arch. Mus. Inv. no. BS21.316

lotus. A banqueter in a Tarquinian tomb (no. 5513) holds an Egyptian lotus flower (Fig. 6). Another banqueter in the Triclinium Tomb is holding a lotus bud (Fig. 10). In these cases, the lotus flower or bud cannot be simply a decorative pattern, but has a precise meaning and purpose.

Can we accept that Etruscan representations of lotus buds and flowers on tomb markers from Marzabotto, which are never realistic, but on the contrary almost ideographic (Fig. 11), were intended to allude to the lotus eaters' *lotos* whose form was so far from any of the stylised graphic representations? Could it be a kind of iconological homonymy? If this is true, the word 'lotus' as well as the form itself, could have been, more or less, synonymous with the River Lethe. When we meet the lotus bud on vases by the Micali painter, it seems to allude to the netherworld, and the Egyptian lotus flower has perhaps transformed into the oblivion plant giving rest and well-being.

Poppy

It has not been possible to trace any representations of poppies in Etruscan tombs, either in banqueters' hands or on the table. Nevertheless, the poppy is well known in other Etruscan representations.¹⁶ On the Murlo terracotta plaques, two women are holding branches with drooping poppy-seed capsules. Are they goddesses or aristocratic ladies? For this discussion, this point is of no importance. We know that Demeter holds wheat ears and poppy stalks at the same time. On the Boccanera plaques, a goddess (Hera) holds poppies as an emblem. We know that Hera, and more rarely Aphrodite, are shown with poppy-seed capsules. The number of seeds in a poppy capsule (Fig. 12) is even more impressive than in a pomegranate, and this is perhaps why these goddesses are allotted this attribute.

Demeter, however, seems to use the hypnotic properties of poppies in order to enable her to sleep while wandering on her quest for Kore/Persephone, and, in the same way, she uses poppies to make Triptolemus sleep. Later, the healing divinities, Apollo and Asclepius, also make use of its properties. Finally, Hades, Persephone, Hypnos and Thanatos are all shown with poppies.¹⁷

So on different levels, the poppy is considered first as a symbol of fecundity, then as a cure for physical pain or mental suffering, and finally as a specific cure for sleeplessness. Ultimately, its lethal properties are well known.

Although there is no clear representation of the poppy in Etruscan funeral art, we know of many globular aryballoi taking this form in the tombs. Most are Corinthian (Figs 13, 14), others Etrusco-Corinthian, and some are bucchero. The flat lip of these vessels bears, either painted or incised, the characteristic daisy-shaped form of the top of a poppy seed capsule (Fig. 14).

From Cyprus there are poppy head vessels as early as 1600, with some clearly shaped to resemble a poppy seed capsule, and, most probably, contained an opiate. But some Rhodian ceramics of the 7th and 6th centuries BC are more exact imitations. Some faience aryballoi made in Rhodes are moulded in the form of a poppy seed capsule and the ribbed body faithfully represents its shape. Sometimes, even the colour imitates the light green of the original. In some



Figure 16 Detail of terracotta funerary urn from Cerveteri, showing perfume or ointment being offered in a globular aryballos. Musée du Louvre, Inv. no. Cp 5193

examples, vertical incisions notch the capsule, and the sap of the poppy is represented as bleeding from these slits (Fig. 15). We know that vertical incisions were the only notching method used in archaic times.¹⁸ In this case, the poppy cannot be considered simply, like the pomegranate, as a symbol of superabundance by way of its seeds: this clear representation of notching indicates the method of opium sap extraction and suggests pharmacological use.¹⁹

So, it seems possible to suggest that this type of globular aryballos contained a perfume, or more probably a cream, which incorporated opium. Consequently, we might imagine that Corinthian and Etrusco-Corinthian aryballoi, with their flat daisy-patterned lip, contained the same substance. It is interesting to note these vessels are usually also decorated with a stylised lotus motif.

What type of perfume was it? Was it just an opium-scented perfume? More probably, it was an ointment, activated by absorption through the skin or evaporation. We know how it was used: it was applied by inverting the aryballos on the arm or on the hand. An urn from Cerveteri shows a banqueter using the globular aryballos in this way (Fig. 16). Did the evaporation of the active ingredient provoke sleep, euphoria or forgetfulness? The Greek name of this mixture is probably *νεπενθος*.²⁰ Helen drinks the *nepenthes* offered by Paris in order to forget Sparta. *Nepenthes* was, then, used as an 'oblivion drink'. But above all, *nepenthes* was a pain-relieving drug that was not always administered as a drink. Nowadays it is generally thought that this mysterious drug was composed mainly of opium. Among the modern medical uses of opium, some ointments exist whose utilisation, and effect, is exactly the same. In the Etruscan funeral context, the use of such a medication is easy to understand. While the lotus flower or bud was a symbol of forgetting, poppies were somniferous. They were intended to bring rest and, as Hamlet said: 'To sleep, perchance to dream'.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Adrian Harrison, Judith Swaddling, Phil Perkins and Josephine Turquet for commenting on this paper.
- 2 A recent exception is the important study by Johnson (2005) concerning the *De Materia Medica* of Dioscorides. Cf. Bertoldi 1936; Singer 1927. See also an excellent article on plants and nature in Etruscan funerary painting, by Fontaine (2009). See also Scarborough (2006).
- 3 Pliny the Elder, *NH*, XV, 37.
- 4 Frequent on vases and in some tombs before 500 BC, e.g. the Tomba dei Tori (Steingraber 1984, 353–5 no. 120).
- 5 E.g. the Tomba fiore di Loto, (Steingraber 1984, 309 no. 63).
- 6 Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Inv. no. 2044.
- 7 *Homeric Hymns*, VII 'To Dionysus', lines 41–3.
- 8 Cato, *De Agricultura*, 111. 'If you wish to determine whether wine has been watered or not: Make a vessel of ivy wood and put in it some of the wine you think has water in it. If it contains water, the wine will soak through and the water will remain, for a vessel of ivy wood will not hold wine.' Today, ivy is said to be cathartic and anthelmintic.
- 9 On the medicinal virtues of pomegranates, see Hsun-Wei Huang *et al.* 2005; Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, 932: 'That [pomegranate] which is sharp helps a burning stomach, is more contractive and more diuretic [than those that are sweet], but tastes unpleasant to the mouth and is astringent... The rinds of pomegranate are also astringent... a decoction of the roots expels and kills worms hidden in the intestines.' Pliny, *NH*, XV, 59.
- 10 Tomba fiore di Loto: Steingraber, 1984 309 no. 63.
- 11 Cf. Fontaine, 2009.
- 12 Simon, 28–32.
- 13 Jannot, 1984, C, I 37, C, III, 8, C, III 9.
- 14 Amigues 2003–4.
- 15 I would like to thank Professor G. Aymonin, Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris, for his help in providing details about the two great families of lotus.
- 16 Booth 1996; Kapoor 1955.
- 17 Zervos (1956, 47) believes that poppies are a symbol of immortality.
- 18 Such seed capsules were found in Sparta in the Menelaion and in the temple of Artemis Orthia. Theophrastus said that the use of poppies (and of course opium) was a secret kept in temples.
- 19 See Harrison and Bartels 2006; Bartels, Swaddling and Harrison, 2006; and Kuhlen. One should also bear in mind that the poppy heads were washed along with crushed leaves according to Pliny to produce 'meconium', which was a very mild opium drink that was used to combat diarrhoea – even today morphine (a component of opium) is used for diarrhoea (e.g. imodium). Pliny *NH*, XX, 76, 202.
- 20 Sprengel (1817, 38), Lewin (1924, 41) and Snijder (1936, 139) quote Dioscorides identifying *nepenthes* as a decoction of henbane which should be 'stronger than opium', but opium is generally preferred by modern scholars (Emmanuel 1952, 541).

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- Note:** abbreviations for ancient texts are the standard ones given in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.
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