

A Comparison of Etruscan and Aegean Wall Painting

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Murals on lime plaster are thought to be an oriental invention, from Egypt or Syria. Subsequently, the technique may have spread in the Aegean region through the Cyclades, perhaps through the island of Thera (Doumas 1999, 17). Fragments of wall paintings from Knossos and Thera date as early as the eighteenth century BCE (Doumas 1999, 31). The earliest known Etruscan murals are from the Tomb of the Roaring Lions in Veii, painted several centuries later. Formal elements and thematic motifs suggest a relation between the Etruscan and Aegean murals. In addition, Etruscan and Aegean people may be related, genetically and linguistically. If, according to Herodotus, Etruscans come from Lydia of Asia Minor (Herodotus *Historiae*, book 1, section 94), then they originated in the Aegean region like the Therans and the Minoans. Even if the Etruscans did not originate in Lydia, they were active seafarers, so that cultural exchange between the regions was inevitable.

Our thesis is that, because Etruscan wall paintings are stylistically and thematically related to the Aegean wall paintings, there was a relationship between the two civilizations. Some similarities may stem from a common influence, such as the Egyptian. Civilizations that have been in contact for centuries may develop a common artistic vocabulary, whose origin is lost in time. On the other hand, there are characteristics unique to Etruscan and Aegean art that are not found in oriental art.

Cultural and Genetic Comparisons

Herodotus recounts a Lydian legend in which half of the population of Lydia sailed to Italy to found a new colony under the leadership of prince Tyrrhenos (Herodotus *Historiae*, book 1, section 94). If Etruscans truly came from Lydia, then they originated not too far from the civilizations of the Aegean islands. Burial mounds (tumuli) of Etruria and Lydia look remarkably similar (Haynes 2000, 72-73), which may constitute further evidence of the common ancestry of the two peoples. On the other hand, such burial mounds are widespread, including North America (Woodward and McDonald 2002), so that the evidence is inconclusive.

Etruscan and Aegean languages may be related. Texts that have been found on the island of Lemnos show an affinity to the Etruscan language. Thucydides reports that Etruscans inhabited Lemnos during ancient times (Thucydides *Historiae*, book 4, chapter 109, section 4). On the other hand, it is possible that the texts on Lemnos come from Etruscan pirates who settled on the island during the sixth or seventh century BCE (Haynes 2000, 1-2), rather than from common ancestors.

A study suggests that there was a gene flow from the eastern or southern Mediterranean shores toward Etruria (Vernesi et al. 2004, 694-704). Although the study finds genetic affinity between the Etruscan and Asia Minor populations, the authors caution that the gene flow may have been a result of sea trade, rather than a common origin of the two

populations. Traditionally, intermarriage among ancient people was a way to reinforce trade relationships. One caveat of this study is that all of the DNA samples were extracted from Etruscan tombs that belonged to the social elite. The authors warn that the aristocrats may be genetically different from the average Etruscan population. This can happen when a foreign elite imposes its rule over a region. Whatever the case may be, even if Etruscans do not derive from Asia Minor, they certainly had enough trade relationships with the Aegean region to guarantee substantial influence in their art. According to Haynes (2000, 2-4), the earliest Etruscan culture (Protovillanovan culture) was born during the Late Bronze Age, sometime in the second millennium BCE. Although historical and archaeological evidence is scant, the mutual linguistic influence between Etruscan and neighboring Indo-European languages points to a lengthy period of proximity between the cultures.

This supposition raises the obvious argument, how did art transfer from one civilization to another. Unlike pottery and handicraft, murals are not portable. There were no known art schools to train students from overseas. In fact, until very recently in human history, art was taught through a system of apprenticeship. So, the fresco technique could be transferred from the Aegean region to Etruria only through migration of the masters themselves. Then, there is the problem of the temporal separation of known artifacts from two civilizations by about one thousand years. Although potters such as Aristonothos were known to migrate from Greece to Etruria (Haynes 2000, 63), that migration happened long after the demise of the Aegean civilizations.

Considering that wall paintings are perishable, the chances of conclusive archaeological evidence are slim. Because of the transient nature of Etruscan architecture, and because of two-and-a-half millennia of war and conquest, Etruscan paintings chiefly survive in underground tombs, where conditions for their preservation are not ideal. More importantly, chamber tombs are relatively recent in Etruscan history; the Villanovan funerary methods were inhumation and cremation, whereby the human remains were buried in simple pits in the ground. Theran wall paintings survived in relatively good condition only because they were preserved in volcanic ash. The chances of discovering Etruscan paintings that are ancient enough to overlap with the late period of the Aegean civilization are remote. If there was artistic influence from the Aegean region on the Etruscan culture, the exact mechanism of this cultural transfer remains unknown.

Formal Comparisons

Formal characteristics common to Aegean and Etruscan murals include:

- (i) A color palette that is restricted to a few colors, with a noticeable absence of greens (although it has been suggested that green pigments were perishable (Doumas 1999, 19)).
- (ii) Genders are distinguished by darker colors for men, and lighter colors for women. Blue indicates the shaven heads of young persons, a conventional rendering of the grayish appearance of shaven hair (Doumas 1999, 23).
- (iii) The compositions often are divided in registers, i.e., lower, middle, and upper. Sometimes, scenes continued on several contiguous walls, even in adjacent rooms.
- (iv) The heads are painted in profile view, with the eyes in frontal view, as in Egyptian painting.
- (v) The figures are fluid, spontaneous, and less rigid than in oriental art.
- (vi) The bodies in early Etruscan vases often are painted schematically, with two triangles joined at the waist. Although Theran silhouettes are more organic, the thinness of the waist is exaggerated.

(vii) The representation of space in both civilizations is similar. Primitive depth separation is achieved through overlapping planes. Neither art used linear perspective. Generally, there is no rendering of volume through shading.

Some of the above points are worth illustrating. That the faces are painted in profile, yet the whole eye stares out from the side of the head, may be an oriental influence. However, the way figures are portrayed in Etruscan and Aegean painting is different from Egyptian and Mesopotamian painting. First, the figures in Etruscan and Aegean painting are much more fluid and graceful. In Fig. 1, the silhouettes of the drowning men and the Etruscan diver are drawn in the shape of an “S,” whereas oriental figures are less flexible. Second, in Egyptian and Sumerian flat art, often the body and the legs are in profile, whereas the torso is turned fully to the front, making the body appear uncomfortably twisted (<http://www.beyondbooks.com/art11/2b.asp> <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/wright/Fall03/paper1images.html> accessed 14 June 2007). In Etruscan and Theran painting, figures are posed in various ways, sometimes with the a frontal view of the torso (Fig. 2), and sometimes not. In general, oriental art has rigid rules, whereas Etruscan and Aegean art has guidelines but no absolute rules, to the degree that figures sometimes seem spontaneous and sloppy. Third, the fluidity of Etruscan and Aegean figures expresses motion, whereas oriental figures are fairly static. Examples of highly animated figures are the Boxing Boys from Akrotiri and the Dancers from the Tomb of the Lionesses (Fig. 2). In the painting from Akrotiri, the boxing boy on the right has just delivered a punch, and the boy on the left is just about to deliver a blow, his gloved hand caught in mid-air. The Etruscan dancers are painted in similarly animated poses, as if they are about ready to fly into the air.

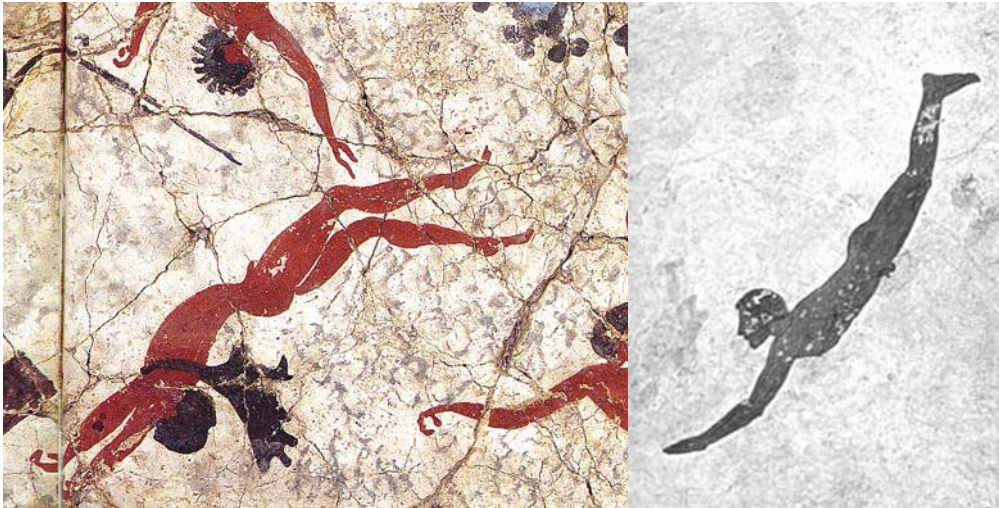


Fig. 1. On the left, drowning men from Miniature Frieze, Room 5, West House, Thera. On the right, diver from Tomb of the Diver, Paestum, ca. 475 BCE.



Fig. 2. On the left, boxing boys from Room 1, Building Beta, Thera. On the right, dancers from the Tomb of the Lionesses, Tarquinia, ca. 530 BCE.

The thinness of the waist often is exaggerated in early Etruscan vases as well as in Theran paintings. This exaggeration makes the chest and the hips more pronounced than they should be. Extremely thin waist also is evident in the Minoan “Prince of Knossos” fresco, ca. 1500 BCE.

Depth separation using overlapping planes, and the lack of rendering volume through shading distinguishes both Aegean and Etruscan art. These perceptions of space may be Egyptian influences (Doumas 1999, 24). Both arts lack linear perspective, although in the Miniature Frieze of Akrotiri there is some effort at intuitive perspective, by painting figures that are further away smaller or placing them higher.

There is a remarkable similarity between the saffron-gatherer from Akrotiri and the dancing girl with incense burner from Tarquinia (Fig. 4). Both heads are in profile, with the whole eye staring out. They have similar, high-bridged noses, hair that is tied at the back of the head (the Etruscan one in a cap), large, round earrings, and a double chin. Majestic female figures in Theran and Etruscan wall paintings seem to have high-bridged noses and a double

chin. The double chin may denote age, as mature women are more likely to develop a double chin (Doumas 1999, 23); or, it may denote social status, since the double chin is more appropriate for women with a sedentary lifestyle who do not perform manual work.



Fig. 4. On the left, saffron-gatherer from Room 3a, Xeste 3, Thera. On the right, girl dancing with incense burner on her head from the Tomb of the Jugglers, Tarquinia, 6th century BCE.

Of course, there are differences between Aegean and Etruscan wall painting. A major difference is that, in Aegean art, figures tend to lose their outline, and become contoured silhouettes filled with flat colors, such as the *Boxing Boys*. On the other hand, Etruscan figures such as the dancers from the Tomb of the Lionesses often are surrounded by heavy outlines. Another difference is that, by the fourth century BCE, Etruscans add shading and early elements of *chiaroscuro*, as evidenced in the Tomb of the Anina family and the Tomb of the Shields. The human profiles in both of these late Etruscan tombs have properly displayed half-eyes, greatly improving their realism.

Thematic Comparisons

Murals in both the Aegean and Etruria often display narratives, as opposed to portraiture or geometric decoration. Typical narratives are athletic events, wars, hunting and fishing, symposia, dances, and, of course, myths. In Etruscan paintings, we can identify many scenes from Greek mythology, such as the ever-popular Trojan War. On the other hand, Aegean art does not display Greek themes, because it was before the development of the Greek mythology. If the Trojan War happened, it probably happened after the destruction of Akrotiri and Knossos. Themes such as the naval expedition on the Miniature Frieze of Akrotiri may be mythological or contemporary. Without abundant preserved inscriptions, and without a key to the Aegean alphabets, the ability to place the themes in mythological, historical, or contemporary context is limited.

Certain motifs are repeated in both Aegean and Etruscan wall paintings, such as dolphins, birds, bulls, and spirals. An obvious reason that dolphins appear in seascapes is that dolphins are common throughout the Mediterranean. Moreover, dolphins possibly symbolize the underwater world, and, by extension, the afterlife. This explains why dolphins are painted in Etruscan tombs. For Etruscans, dolphins are sacred to Apollo. One of Apollo's names is Delphic, related to Delphi, and dolphins. Dolphins in Thera and Etruscan art are strikingly similar, displayed in leaping action, in fluid, animated shapes drawn with organic lines (Fig. 5). In the east wing of the Palace of Knossos, dolphins are less animated, although by proper positioning the artist makes them appear as if they are leaping. In all cases, the artists make a

conscious effort for realism. One difference is that Etruscan work is more spontaneous, and the artist sometimes emphasizes line at the expense of color. The dolphin and some of the birds in the Tomb of the Hunting and Fishing are crudely colored, or they do not have color.



Fig. 5. On the left, dolphin from Miniature Frieze, Room 5, West House, Thera. On the right, dolphin from the Tomb of the Hunting and Fishing, Tarquinia, ca. 530 BCE.

Waterfowl are central motifs in both Aegean and Etruscan art (Fig. 6). As in the case of dolphins, artists have been inspired by the similar fauna of the Eastern Mediterranean. Many waterfowl are migratory, so they are ubiquitous. In both arts, the birds are depicted with organic lines. The artists make a conscious effort to realistically display birds in flight. As in the Tomb of the Hunting and Fishing, the Etruscan artist who decorated the Tomb of the Augurs was more concerned with line than color, so that the birds are rendered monochromatic.



Fig. 6. On the left, detail of duck from Sector Alpha at Thera. On the right, detail of duck from the Tomb of the Augurs, Tarquinia, ca. 520 BCE.

Swallows have ritual significance in both Aegean and Etruscan civilizations (Fig. 7). Room Delta 2 in Akrotiri shows seven life-size paintings of swallows, whose meaning has been associated with epiphanic rituals, i.e., divine revelation (Foster 1995, 422-424). Likewise, Etruscans sought divine omens in the flight of swallows and other birds. In the portrait of Vel Saties, the founder of the François Tomb at Vulci, the kneeling “arnza” figure seemingly holds a swallow. According to one explanation (Haynes 2000, 281), Vel Saties’ contemplative look is because he is preoccupied with interpreting the flight of the bird. The importance of bird divination is emphasized by the authority of Vel Saties, depicted as a full-length recognizable figure, dressed in luxurious clothing. In fact, Vel Saties’ portrait has been considered as the first extant, full-length painted portrait in Western art (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/1997/97.9.26.html> , accessed 14 June 2007). The importance

of bird divination or auspiciation in Etruscan culture also is evident from the story of Lucumo. Lucumo was said to become king of Rome when an eagle snatched and subsequently replaced the cap on his head. Due to their seasonal migration, Thera and Etruscan swallows may also be symbolic of the rite of spring and the regeneration of nature. On the other hand, an alternative interpretation of the swallows in Thera denies them ritual significance; the swallows in Akrotiri may simply decorate a safe, aesthetically pleasing environment for an important person (Hollinshead 1989, 339).



Fig. 7. On the left, one of the swallows in Room Delta 2 at Akrotiri. On the right, detail of “arnza” figure holding swallow, François Tomb, Vulci, 350-330 BCE.

Bulls appear in Minoan and Etruscan paintings (Fig. 8), as well as in oriental art. Bulls have a special place in Minoan culture, with religious and spiritual significance. This is evidenced from the fresco painting of Bull-Leaping (ca. 1500 BCE), and the Greek myth of the half-bull Minotaur. Bulls possibly signify strength and virility. Most importantly, bulls serve to challenge man, and by challenging bulls man can re-affirm his control over nature. In this sense, Minoan bull leaping is akin to the Spanish bullfights and North American rodeo. Similarly, in the Etruscan Tomb of the Bulls, the sexually aroused bull that charges at the homoerotic couple may carry a life-affirming message (Haynes 2000, 223). That Etruscans deified the bull is evident from its anthropomorphic face, that has been attributed to Acheloös.



Fig. 8. On the left, bull-jumping from the east wing of the Palace of King Minos in Knossos, ca. 1500 BCE. On the right, detail of erotic symplegma and bull from the Tomb of the Bulls, Tarquinia, ca. 540 BCE.

Decorative geometric motifs sometimes are surprisingly similar among cultures. Spiral decorations from Akrotiri are similar to Etruscan spirals from the Tomb of the Shields (Fig. 9). Spirals from the east wing of the Minoan Palace of Knossos, below the dolphin frieze, are nearly identical to those in Akrotiri.



Fig. 9. On the left, frieze with spirals from Room 2, Xeste 3, Thera. On the right, spirals from the Tomb of the Shields, Monterozzi Necropolis, Tarquinia, second half of 4th century BCE.

Conclusions

There are formal and thematic similarities between Aegean and Etruscan wall paintings. Even though the archaeological findings from the two civilizations are at least one thousand years apart, linguistic and genetic affinities suggest the possibility of a common origin. Even though the similarities may come from a common oriental influence, the two styles are more similar to each other than to the oriental style. Because there is no conclusive evidence, these questions require interdisciplinary and concerted research effort among art historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists, and genetists.

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