THE GOLDEN DICE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I was inspired to write about the Etruscans after I found a photo of a sixth-century BC sarcophagus upon which a husband and wife were sculpted in a pose of affection. The image of the lovers, known as "The Married Couple," intrigued me. What ancient culture acknowledged women as equals to their husbands? Or exalted marital fidelity with such open sensuality? Discovering the answer led me to the decadent and mystical Etruria, and the war between early Rome and Veii. In my author's note for *The Wedding Shroud* I wrote about the difficulties experienced in researching the Etruscan civilization: I recommend you read it if you are interested to find out more about their origins and religion as well as information on social status and bisexuality in the ancient world. (You can access my author's note via my website (www. elisabethstorrs.com) together with other pieces of research and photographs on my blog: Triclinium (http://elisabethstorrs.blogspot.com.au)

The ancient sources I used to research the siege of Veii were accounts from historians such as Livy, Plutarch and Dionysius of Halicarnassus. However, problems arose in relying on such commentators due to the fact they were writing centuries after the fall of Etruria with their prejudices firmly entrenched. In essence, what we know about this war is from the viewpoint of the conquerors over the conquered. Nevertheless, the story they tell is compelling. Livy chronicled the events that occurred in each year of the siege, including the lists of the elected military tribunes with consular power (whom I have called "consular generals"). However, as dozens of generals were elected over the ten-year siege, I have pared down the cast by choosing only Genucius and Calvus to represent the plebeians, while highlighting the disastrous feud between the patricians Sergius and Verginius. As for the famous speech exhorting men to fight throughout winter, I have attributed this to Camillus when in fact it was a patrician named Appius Claudius who stirred the common men to fight. I have also condensed the various campaigns and political wrangling across the decade to the last three years of the conflict for the sake of pace and dramatic tension. And, as is the inclination of an historical novelist, I have invented other circumstances to enhance the plot. As for the authenticity of the scenes I describe, I have attempted to be consistent with current historians' views, but ultimately I present my own interpretation of how Etruscans and the early Republican Romans might have lived.

The episode in which the gates were closed on Veientane troops is mentioned only briefly by Livy. As is often the case with this historian, the most appalling events were glossed over in a few lines: "The Veientes, too, suffered heavily, for the gates of the town had been shut to prevent an irruption of the Romans, and many of them were killed outside before they could get through" (*The Early History of Rome*,

Book 5.14, translated by A. de Selincourt, Penguin Books, London, 1971, p. 357). For those who wish to access Livy's detailed account I recommend reading Book V of *The Early History of Rome.*

The characters that appear in the novel are fictitious, except for those consular generals Livy has mentioned. Indeed, no rendering of the story of Veii can be told without reference to Marcus Furius Camillus. This general (who was appointed dictator five times but was never elected consul) was named the second founder of Rome by the Greek biographer Plutarch due to his incredible political acumen, military innovation, bravery and charisma. Any other characteristics I may have attributed to him (and the other generals named by Livy) are purely my own invention. This is particularly the case in relation to Camillus' attitude towards supporting the political ambitions of commoners. As such he was not the lone patrician who was voted in with five plebeian generals. However, given the fact he was elected consular general several times (and later was called upon to lead Rome during various crises), he clearly held the confidence of those voting in the Comitium.

Discovering that Veii and Rome were located a mere twelve miles across the Tiber has always captivated me. In essence, just by crossing an expanse of water, you could be transported from the equivalent of the Dark Ages into someplace akin to the Renaissance.

The Etruscans were enlightened and cosmopolitan, and their women were afforded education, high status and independence. As a result their society was often described as wicked by Greek and Roman historians, whose cultures repressed women and were xenophobic. Etruscan wives dined with their husbands at banquets and drank wine. In such commentators' eyes, this liberal behavior may well have equated with depravity. One infamous account, by an often discredited Greek historian Theopompus of Chios, claimed that "the women of the Tyrrhenians (Etruscans) are common property". In contrast, their beautiful tomb art portrays devoted and loving husbands and wives. So which version of Etruscan women is correct? Promiscuous or faithful?

Etruscan culture clearly celebrated both marriage and sex. The image of men and women embracing is a constant theme in their tombs, and ranges from being demure, as in the case of The Married Couple, to strongly erotic (Tomb of the Bulls) and even pornographic (Tomb of the Whippings). The latter illustrations seem to confirm the more prurient view of Etruscan women, but the "symplegma," or sexual embrace, was not always a gratuitous portrayal of abandon but rather an apotropaic symbol invoking the forces of fertility against evil and death.

It is clear from studying this society's art that they celebrated life and followed the religion of Fufluns (the Greek Dionysus and Roman Bacchus, whose later cult adherents were famous for indulging in debauchery), which, in its purest form of worship, was a belief in the power of regeneration through the ecstatic

merging of the spirit with the god. Interestingly, Etruscan tomb paintings are heavy with Dionysian symbolism when depicting banquets, and their pottery also portrays Bacchanalian scenes. The cult was condemned in ancient Greece and Rome because of the opportunity it granted to women and slaves to participate in the rites. This resonates with me in terms of the independence enjoyed by Etruscan women. Accordingly, in my opinion, it may well be possible that their culture condoned female wantonness while also honoring wives and mothers. Certainly, some credence is given by modern historians in regard to illegitimate children, despite the fact it is Theopompus who raised this when he stated "the Tyrrhenians (Etruscans) bring up all the children born not knowing who is the father of each", (fragment from *Histories*, Book 43, of Theopompus of Chios, as quoted by Athenaeus in *The Learned Banquet*, sourced from Sybille Haynes, *Etruscan Civilization*, The J. Paul Getty Trust, Los Angeles, 2000, p. 256). From this it can possibly be deduced that noblewomen were wealthy enough to afford to keep the children of extramarital affairs because they could transmit their own status to the children. I have explored this issue in the love affair between Ramutha and Caile, which also was inspired by a favorite theme in Etruscan art of older women embracing youthful lovers. However, I readily accept that my interpretation could be flawed.

The world of Roman women of the early Republic is no less fascinating. As with my research into Etruria, reliable sources were difficult to find to provide a definitive view of this period, and again I was forced to depend on non-contemporaneous sources. Much of what is understood about Roman women in early classical times is often deduced from Roman legislation that was enacted centuries later in the Augustan period. Rome valued monogamy, and the concepts of culpability for adultery and "stuprum" (extramarital sex) were applied when classifying a woman's status. The propriety expected of a Roman matron was the standard by which women were judged. The two ends of the spectrum were the respectable wife versus the dissolute whore. One was lauded as a decent citizen who must be faithful to her husband; the other was so corrupted that she lost all claim to moral or legal rights. The greater the degree of promiscuity, reward for sex and lack of emotional attachment, the more tainted the woman became. However, given a prostitute was irrevocably stained, she could not be punished for committing adultery. That crime was reserved for a wife alone.

Prostitution was heavily regulated in Rome in the late Republican and imperial times. There is considerable commentary about this period but, alas, no certainty as to the rules relating to the "oldest profession" at the time I set the book. Nevertheless, I have based Pinna's circumstances on the assumption that imperial laws enshrined what had been customary practice throughout Republican times. There is, however, a reference made by the Roman historian, Tacitus, that an official register of prostitutes was kept "in accordance with a custom which obtained among

the early Romans" (Tacitus, *Annals*, ii, 85, as sourced in Otto Keifer, *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome*, Abbey Library, London, 1974, p. 60).

There were many different categories of prostitutes, all of whom were known by colorful names. The lupae ("she wolves") who serviced clients in "lupanarias", were reputedly called this because they were as rapacious as wolves. The inspiration for Pinna came from reading about the unregistered "noctiluae" (nightwalkers), who were colloquially known as "night moths," including the "busturiae" who doubled as hired mourners and plied their trade amid the tombs.

A concubine was seen as a mixture between a matron and a harlot. Her status was ambiguous and has been described as "safe and schizophrenic" (Thomas A. J. McGinn, *Concubinage and the Lex Iulia on Adultery*, Vol. 121, Transactions of the American Philological Association, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1995, p. 370). These de facto wives were denied the status of a matron because they had committed stuprum (and, it appears, were not subject to the laws of adultery either), yet they were considered respectable enough to be accepted by society. They were usually slaves or freedwomen, although there is evidence that lower-class freeborn citizens also chose to enter into such relationships. In most instances, concubines were entitled to "divorce" their partners without consent. Often widowers chose de facto wives to avoid complications with the inheritances of their legitimate children when marrying again. Concubines were also commonly taken by young noblemen before the men reached an age to enter political life and were expected to officially wed. And it is true that Camillus was responsible for introducing a bachelor tax because of the tendency of young men to avoid marrying war widows whose numbers were growing due to the many wars being conducted at this time.

Status was signified through a dress code. Matrons were entitled to wear a stola and fillets in their hair as a symbol of both their married standing and their citizenship. In comparison, a prostitute was singled out by wearing a toga. (Compare this to the garb of Etruscan noblewomen during this period, who wore tight-fitting chitons of the finest material that showed the outline of the breasts and nipples.) See Larissa Bonfante, *Etruscan Dress*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2003, p. 39.) I was unable to ascertain whether a freeborn or freed concubine could wear a stola despite the fact she was a citizen. I've assumed the taint of stuprum would preclude such a right. Accordingly I have deprived Pinna the opportunity, too.

The origins of the Troy Game are obscure. The inspiration for the episode came from the sixth-century BC Tragliatella Vase, which portrays a horseman emerging from a spiral inscribed with the word "Truia." This is considered the earliest depiction of the game. The rite is described in *The Aeneid* by the Roman poet, Vergil, as the final event in the funeral games commemorating the death of Anchises,

who was the father of the Trojan Aeneas. Vergil alludes to the patterns formed during the initiation exercise as a simulation of the Cretan labyrinth, an escape from which is a triumph of life over death.

The character of the Phersu and his hound are depicted in the Tomb of the Olympic Games and the Tomb of the Augurs at Tarquinia. The equivalent Latin term is "persona" or masked actor. In the murals the Phersu wears a bearded red mask, pointed hat and short tunic and is torturing a hooded man by letting the dog loose on him. It is a singularly chilling sight. As Etruscan tomb art portrays the events held at funeral games, there is conjecture that the Phersu's role was to conduct a blood sacrifice to placate the anger of the dead while revitalizing the soul of the deceased on the journey to the Beyond. (This rite was echoed in the gladiatorial battles later held at funeral games in Rome.)

As for knowledge of warfare during the early Republic, sources were scarce. Nevertheless, I have attempted to provide as authentic a depiction as possible of military campaigns, as obtained from journal articles about the period. What is of interest is that the Romans adopted their weaponry and battle formations from the Etruscans, (for example, the phalanx). Given there are many readers who are experts on the Roman army, I trust some leeway will be afforded to me for any errors I may have inadvertently made relating to military life.

A bibliography is available on my website, but sources I found of particular value in my research included: Sybille Haynes' *Etruscan Civilization* (The J. Paul Getty Trust, Los Angeles, 2000); Eva Canterella's *Bisexuality in the Ancient World* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992); *Etruscans: Eminent Women, Powerful Men,* edited by Patricia S. Lulof and Iefke Van Kampen (W Books, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 2012); Larissa Bonfante and Judith Swaddling's *Etruscan Myths* (The British Museum Press, London, 2006); Larissa Bonfante's *Etruscan Dress* (The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2003); Thomas A. J. McGinn's *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome* (Oxford University Press, London 1998); *The Oxford Classical Dictionary,* edited by Simon Hornblower, Anthony Spawforth and Esther Eidinow (Oxford University Press, New York, 2003); *The Religion of the Etruscans,* edited by Nancy De Grummond and Erika Simon (University of Texas Press, Austin, 2006); and Livy's *The Early History of Rome*, translated by A. de Selincourt, (Penguin Books, London, 1971).