

THE WEDDING SHROUD

By Elisabeth Storrs

Author's Note

More than ten years ago 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 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.

When ancient Italy is mentioned most think of Rome as the dominant culture. Yet the Etruscans had built a sophisticated and extensive civilisation well before the Romans were fighting turf wars with other Latin tribes such as the Sabini, Volscii and Aequi. At one stage Etruscan Kings ruled Rome, the third and last of which was expelled after the tragic rape of Lucretia. In fact, at its height, Etruria and its settlements extended throughout the modern regions of Umbria, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Lazio and part of Campania and also dominated trade routes stretching from the Black Sea to northern Africa.

The Etruscans were called Tusci or Etrusci by the Romans, and the Tyrrhenoi by the Greeks while referring to themselves as the Rasenna. Over the years there has been much conjecture as to whether they migrated from Asia Minor (first mentioned in the accounts of the Greek historian, Herodotus, who wrote of the legendary journey of the wily Prince Tyrrhenus), however it is now accepted that the Etruscans were indigenous to Italy.

Learning that the two rival cities of Rome and Veii were situated only twelve miles apart across the Tiber gave me the idea of exploring the prejudices between the society of the hedonistic Etruscans and that of the austere emergent Rome. And so, the story of a marriage of a Roman girl to an Etruscan man was born.

Although recent archaeological digs are revealing more about the Etruscans, their civilisation has often been dubbed ‘mysterious’ because no literature has survived other than remnants of ritual texts. Instead, their world is revealed through their fantastic art. Engraved mirrors, funerary sculpture and paintings as well as votives, furniture and utensils give us a glimpse into their world and, in turn, served as a rich vein of inspiration for episodes within the book. 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 might have lived.

In contrasting the two societies it was important to portray early Rome as opposed to the more familiar eras of the later Republic and Empire. Unfortunately, most of the history of both the nascent Rome and its Etruscan enemy comes from accounts recorded by historians many centuries later through the prism of their times. In effect, the conquerors of Etruria wrote about Etruscan history with all the prejudices of the victor over the vanquished.

Another source of knowledge about Etruscan culture is fragments of texts from contemporary travellers to their cities which were quoted by later historians. These Greek commentators (who came from a society that repressed women) often described the licentiousness and opulence of the Etruscans and the wickedness of their wives. The validity of these fragments is often criticised by modern historians because of their authors’

prejudices. One notorious example is Theopompus of Chios, a fourth-century-BC Greek historian, who expressed his shock at the profligacy of the Etruscans.

Theopompus wrote, among other scurrilous observations, that his hosts had open intercourse with prostitutes, courtesans, boys and even wives at their banquets.

Furthermore, ‘They make love and disport themselves, occasionally within view of each other, but more often they surround their beds with screens, made of interwoven branches over which they spread their mantles’.¹

From studying Etruscan tomb art, it is clear these people celebrated life: dancing in what appears to be ecstasy, and with wives dining in semi-transparent robes as they sat drinking wine next to their husbands. Many worshipped Fufluns, the Greek Dionysus and Roman Bacchus, whose later cult adherents were famous for indulging in debauchery. Yet Theopompus’ views seemed at odds with the commitment that is also depicted between Etruscan couples in funerary art. So which version was correct? In the end I concluded that his account couldn’t be completely discounted because the concept of a society that condones female promiscuity while also honouring wives and mothers is not necessarily contradictory. For while it can be erroneous to compare modern societies with ancient ones, it could be argued that this attitude to females occurs in many present-day Western cultures. With this in mind, I devised the concept of melding fidelity with sexual abandon through the act of ‘lying beneath the reed’.

To demonstrate why it was so extraordinary for the Etruscans to afford high status and independence to their women, I compared the equivalent attitudes of the Greeks and Romans to females in daily life. In doing so I described the lives of slave and courtesan,

¹ Fragment from Histories Book 43 of Theopompus of Chios as quoted by Athenaeus in *The Learned Banquet* (Sybille Haynes, 2000, *Etruscan Civilization*, The J. Paul Getty Trust, pp 256–7).

maid and matron through the Grecian Cytheris and Erene, and the Roman Caecilia and Aemilia together with the Etruscan Larthia and Seianta.

An understanding of the attitude to female sexuality was also needed. This research was fascinating to say the least. It soon became evident that Roman and Greek sexual morals involved a complex construct that makes our modern-day gender politics pale in comparison. Sex was seen from a frame of reference of male bisexuality rather than the polarities of heterosexual or homosexual love. Power and status was all important. There was an emphasis on class distinction and the dominance or passivity of participants rather than gender—that is, the concept of the lover and beloved. Women, freedmen and slaves were all considered on a lower level to freeborn men. Lesbianism was completely taboo, as the idea of a woman preferring another woman over a man was unthinkable. Accordingly whether a woman might enjoy sex was irrelevant. The conception of children, preferably male, was the primary purpose. In the case of the Etruscans, however, I concluded that their men might vary to Greeks and Romans in their attitude to women's sexual gratification as it's established that they afforded women equal status. Certainly, the visible expressions of undying love, as depicted in funerary art, would seem to support this.

There is ample evidence to confirm that male sex was practised in Etruria as well as in Greece and Rome. Ancient historians speak of the Etruscan's inordinate love for youths and boys, and Etruscan tomb art displays it. I doubt, however, that their men's concern over status would have differed from the Greeks' and Romans'; that is, aristocratic freeborn warriors could not be seen to be subservient to a male slave or freedman or, indeed another freeborn man. Again, bisexuality was the defining force with sex between males not necessarily considered in the same way as we view gay sex today. In fact homophobia was just as prevalent then as it is now. In Rome homosexuals were called 'molles' meaning soft.

As for pederasty, as far as I am aware, there is no evidence either way as to whether this was observed in Etruria. Its culture, though, was heavily influenced by the Greeks, and in city-states like Athens, Sparta and Thebes noblemen were known to teach young freeborn boys of their civic and military obligations through this practice. Accordingly, in also portraying men's sexuality in the book, I explored the ancient world's rationale for pederasty, and the psychology and hypocrisy behind that custom.

Drugs such as qat and opium were used in the ancient world, together with aphrodisiacs containing poisonous ingredients like mandrake, or 'mandragora'. Nevertheless, the 'Catha', 'Zeri' (meaning 'serene' or 'free' in Etruscan) and the love potion 'Alpan' are my own suggestions. 'Magic' toadstools were also used during religious ecstatic ritual, with their toxicity diluted via what I called 'Divine Milk'—that is, the milk or urine of reindeers that had eaten the fungi.

Pomegranates were used for contraceptive purposes but I couldn't find any conclusive evidence as to their efficacy. Sylphion, however, may have been effective because it is now extinct, presumably because demand outstripped supply. It was the main commodity for Cyrene with that city's coins bearing an image of the plant.

The Etruscans followed the tenets of the *Etrusca Disciplina*, with its complex branches of haruspicy, divination and interpretation of lightning. Their belief in prophecy and the proroguing of fate was raised to a science. In fact, the prediction of their civilisation's demise after ten sacred saecula appears to have come true. Unfortunately, as the Syracusans seized control of Etruria's trade routes and the Romans slowly dominated its cities, the more life-affirming cult of Fulvius was overtaken by a death cult preoccupied with the torments of the journey to the afterlife.

The characters that appear in the novel are fictitious, except for those referred to in ancient history and legend. The fame of Marcus Furius Camillus, who is mentioned by the Roman historian Livy and named the second founder of Rome by the Greek biographer Plutarch is still recognised by modern Romans—Furio Camillo is an underground railway station in Rome. However, any characteristics I may have attributed to him are purely my own invention. Livy also wrote of the valiant Mamercus Aemilius who led Rome to victory in two Fidenate wars (for simplicity, I chose to compress these two conflicts into one). The stories of Lars Tolumnius (Laris Tulumnes), Tanaquil, Lucretia and Verginia, and the great king Servius Tullius, all featured in the histories of Rome. A consular general named Manlius Aemilius Mamercus (upon which I modelled uncle Aemilius) is also mentioned by Livy, but no details of his life are provided.

When I finally made a pilgrimage to Veii I found very little remains other than a few archaeological sites in the beautiful Parco di Veio national park. It was pleasing, though, to think that the old city, once considered the most splendid in Etruria, may still lie buried among wooded ravines and open spaces rather than under bitumen and concrete.

As for the sixth-century-BC married couple, I finally saw them in the Louvre in 2003. The memory of our meeting still makes me smile.