Who let the animals out?
Changing modes in Etruscan mirror decoration

by

Ingela M.B. Wiman

Abstract:

This paper discusses why depiction of domesticated animals like sheep, goat and cattle are absent from the Etruscan mirror engravers repertoire. Occasional dogs and horses appear in scenes as markers of an aristocratic milieu. A youthful Atunis, for example, is accompanied by his sporting dog when he sets out to greet his lover. Depiction of domestic animals are common in other types of artefacts from the Etruscan culture. For some reason depictions of animals, surrounding the Etruscan people in their every-day life were not deemed suitable for decorating mirrors. This paper suggests a solution to this issue.

The Etruscan civilisation would remain forever silent without its art. Most of our knowledge of this important people derives from their artistic performances. The scholar is therefore met with a fundamentally challenging question: is it at all possible to assess the intangible aspects of this culture by aid of their material remains and artistic accomplishment? L. Morgan addresses a similar issue in an interesting article on Minoan art. She suggests that if the total known context of a manifestation of art is appraised, a better understanding of its hidden meaning would be obtained. Accepting this, we would assume that even absences could tell a story and that fundamental changes in the pictorial schemes over time would indicate some fundamental change also in ideology and societal pattern.

The Etruscans were familiar with motifs presenting various kinds of domesticated animals. The slabs with banqueting scenes from Aquarrossa, Tuscania, Velletri, show dogs under the tables, hopefully awaiting crumbs from their master’s meals. A ploughing peasant tells the thousand years old story of man dependant on his oxen for his sustenance (Villa Giulia, inv. no. 24562). The famous sarcophagus from the Sperandio necropolis of Perugia (inv. no. 195) from c. 490 depicts cattle, goats, and pack-mules, all part of the booty from some northern raid. Horses are often represented, this animal, the most connected to the life-style of the aristocrats – hunting, competition and warfare. Why then, have domesticated animals or other motifs from daily life generally been sorted out from the repertoire of the mirror engravers in Etruria?

Introducing mirrors

Bronze mirrors were made from the Villanova period and it seems that already in this early period the mirrors were regarded as having a front, the reflecting side, and a back suitable for decorations. The earliest engraved Etruscan mirrors emanate from the late sixth century BC. These were important objects and status indicators of their owners commonly assumed to have been women (even if the beginning of the manufacture coincides with the mode of clean-shaved men). We have two words in Etruscan for mirrors, malstria and malena, again indicating the contemporary importance of these objects.
importance for present-days scholars is immense, giving evidence of letters, spelling, language, literary taste, penetration of Greek cultural influences, dress-styles, gods, and so on. The suggestion that the mirrors were intended for the tomb and therefore did carry motifs appropriate to the after-life does not apply. Mirrors were mended and repolished in antiquity and therefore used by living women. In fact, the motifs must have represented something vital to these women – these Greek gods, refined myths or Homeric tales of early Etruscan times, later joined by the Etruscan divinities and heroes from the ending fourth century BC.

Presenting some Archaic and Classic mirrors

As stated above, we have no genre scenes presenting domestic animals in their own right on the chief motif of mirrors. In the Archaic or Classic periods, however, when the mirror engravers mostly depict stories from Greek mythology, there is an abundant animal life in the mirror exergues when they are present. It must be admitted that such exergue decoration is rather unusual but when they appear they are always related to the main motif. Look at our first specimen, a mirror published in CSE,7 (Great Britain 1.1, cat. no. 18), Turan meeting a young or, simply human, lover (Fig. 1). He is smaller than she is and perhaps intends to present her with the mirror he holds in his right hand and the flower or pomegranate in his left. He cheered by his dog, a suitable attribute for an aristocrat or a hunter. She is bigger, older or just divine. She is holding a flower to his face. The coding of this motif is probably just. It can only be a divine actor that is made in a bigger scale than the mortal presented in a common arena, or a younger man facing an adult woman i.e. Turan with some lover, possibly Atanis, a common motif on mirrors. The main scene is Greek and presented in a clear and unambiguous way according to the standard formula. Than look at the accompanying scene on the exergue, a hen chasing a cat or small dog! Here is an Etruscan mind at work with the humorous undertones that is so typical in the Etruscan dealings with the Greek art. The hunt is reversed on the main scene, an older woman chasing a youngster, and on the exergue, a hen chasing a predator. Normally the reverse would be expected.

The next example is from the classical period, (CSE U.S.A cat. no. 14), showing Pele/Peleus astound by the beauty of a naked Thetis/Thetis preparing for their coming wedding (Fig. 2). The identification of the characters and the meaning of the motif are clear from the accompanying inscriptions. Here is not the place for a detailed discussion on the possible Greek prototypes for Etruscan motifs on mirrors. A similar vivid scene, however, is not known from the preserved Greek art but might have existed. Still, this motif has the distinguished Etruscan character of facetious mocking with the tales of the Greeks. The little griffin puppy reclining on the exergue of this mirror also exemplifies this phenomenon. Seemingly sleeping, he opens a cunning eye to the spectator – you and I both know what will be the outcome of this union!

The following example also shows a wedding-to-be, but an Etruscan one, the British Museum (hereafter cited as BM) mirror inv. no. 626, dated to around 350 BC (Fig. 3). It shows the dressing of the bride Malavisch surrounded by three attendants and Turan. From E. Gerhard, Etruskische Spiegel II, pl. 213.

Fig. 2. Etruscan tang mirror CSE U.S.A. 3, cat. no. 14, showing Pele/Peleus astound by the beauty of a naked Thetis/Thetis preparing for their coming wedding.

Fig. 3. Etruscan tang mirror, British Museum mirror inv. no. 626 which shows the dressing of the bride Malavisch surrounded by three attendants and Turan. From E. Gerhard, Etruskische Spiegel II, pl. 213.
The last example from the classical period is a mirror from the Metropolitan museum, (CSE, U.S.A. 3, cat. no. 15), *Uthste* and *Velparun* are flanking *Cerca* who is in the process of transforming one of Odysseus men into a pig. (Fig. 4). The unfortunate man has only one remaining human limb, his left leg; the rest is all “hoggish”, complete with a curl on its tail. In this case the mocking exergue decoration has been moved upwards as part of the main design. The mirror is dated 350-300 BC.

From the later half of the fourth century large tang mirrors with elaborate motifs in three parts are created, the three-parted disc group mirrors. It is clear that the engraving masters of these were inspired by the large vases made in South-Italian cities like Tarentum and Paestum between 350-325 BC, often with theatrical motifs. The members of the aristocratic or mercantile elite who bought these mirrors knew well the myths of the Attic drama. Knowledge of the Attic theatre was a token of erudition by the Greeks in Hellenistic times. The Etruscans were, surely, also interested of possessing an air of erudition. A closer look at such a crater, the volute crater from Tarentum attributed to the Dareios painter now in (BM inv. no. 1956.12-26.1) with a motif from Euripides *Hippolytus*, or the bell crater from Paestum, *BM* (inv. no. 1917.12-10.1) with a motif from Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, one finds that the three-parted structure of the vases is reflected on the mirror discs. Furthermore, the elaborate and decorative style of these vases, with intricate dress details and elegantly formed coiffures, as well as many small in-fill ornaments, are directly copied by the mirror masters. These mirrors display ornamentally rich and elaborated motifs witnessing the good knowledge of the Etruscan engraver of Greek myths, sometimes of a very sophisticated nature. But, as has been pointed out by L. Bonfante among others: “The Etruscans often produced their own versions of Greek stories with a different cast of characters and a different slant from the Greek account.” This fact has to be considered in discussing the role of Greek myths in the Etruscan society. R. Buxton emphasises that myths had a functional aspect only in the society in which they were performed. The freedom used by the late Classical Etruscans in dealing with Greek myths might suggest that their prime function in the receiving society were as entertaining stories. Another explanation is also possible. The Etruscans used these Greek myths freely in combination with their own mythological cosmos from this period onwards. It is therefore possible to suggest that at this time, the Etruscan had embraced the Hellenic culture to the extent of thinking of it as their own and considered themselves in no way inferior to the Greeks as citizens of a Hellenised world at the time.

The changing formula of the later Etruscan motifs

As stated above, a new “spirit” is discernible in the mirror motifs from the later Etruscan period. The beginning of the third century is notable for the invasion of Etruscan divinities and heroes in the universe of the Etruscan mirror. From this time on, domestic animals as
The left-hand figure is Esplacie/Asclepius who dress the wounds of Prumathe/Prometeus. Asclepius makes here his only appearance in Etruscan art. This fact alone indicates that this motif is modelled on a Greek prototype.

Discussion

An interesting trait of these late mirrors is that they evoke the Greek theatre, not only in the main motifs. The surrounding wreath of spicy leaves formed like a garland sometimes have pinecone endings. Such garlands were, among other things, used to decorate festive podiums. J. Beazley noticing the small rectangular ornaments of the spiky garlands, calls the garland bakchos and names the casings, accordingly, bakchos rings: “I ought to have observed there, when speaking of the favourite border in these mirrors [spiky garland group] that rings or slides were not used on ‘Bakchoi’ only, but also for securing wreaths or festoons…”.

Most handle mirrors end in an animal head of a ram or a hind. L. Bonfante has made the observation that the handles hind’s heads look exactly like the head of the hind accompanying the priestess of Dionysus on a sarcophagus in the museum of Barbarano Romano, Viterbo. All these traits seem to imply a Dionysian connection. The ram, however, is not an iconographical attribute of Dionysus. The god pictured in the guise of a ram was Apollo Karneios. A coin with this motif have been found in South-Italy dated to 425-390 BC.

Another interesting complication emerges in the fact that handle mirrors with hind’s head endings often display a laurel wreath surrounding the main motif. The laurel is an attribute of Apollo, while the ram’s head handles are preferred for the spiky garland, “Dionysian”, mirror group. The interesting conclusion emerges that, perhaps, the ram’s head has been mistaken for what is really a buck’s head, the he-goat that accompanies satyrs in Dionysian scenes i.e. Capra rather than Pecus. Various species of the Capra family have horns that are turned backwards behind the ears. The horns of the mirror animals, however, look very thick like those of a ram. The domesticated species of goat normally have thinner horns. The detailed rendering of the locks on the reverse side of the heads might refer to the goats “beard” hanging from its chin (Fig. 7). It is impossible to state anything conclusive about this issue. The two gods, however, Fufluns and Apulu/Aplu in Etruscan, are closely connected and both have definite affinities to the belle arti and the theatre of the Greeks.

So why did the Etruscan interest in the Greek theatre increase so dramatically in the first half of the third century BC? It is fair to assume that the impetus for the
later Etruscan mirror motifs derive from South-Italian vase paintings but Attic vase-painting disappears around 320, and the South-Italian soon after. The engraving master who fabricated the Metropolitan museum mirror (Fig. 6), with the *Prometheus vincit* motif, sometimes between 280-270 BC must have had other prototypes than the ones his predecessors made use of. Scholars often consider the contemporary Hellenistic painting when looking for prototypes to Etruscan art. J.J. Pollitt gives a colourful description of some traits he finds particularly characteristic for the Hellenistic period, among them a theatrical mentality that he finds so predominant that sometimes life was perceived as a reflection of the theatre. The Etruscans surely shared also this mentality with their southern Greek neighbours. The prototype for motifs like *Prometheus vincit* may well have been some Hellenistic painting or paintings on theatrical posters used to announce a dramatic performance to be given in a South-Italian city or, suggestively, an Etruscan one. Even if we never find a theatrical mask engraved on a mirror, the Etruscan word for this object, *Phersu*, was transformed to the Latin *persona*. The Latin *histrio* was derived from the Etruscan name for an actor, *ister*. Telling facts, indeed, of the Etruscan interest in the theatre.

Conclusive remarks

We have seen that the Etruscan engravers in Archaic and Classical times sometimes used domestic animals as elaboration or complements to the main motifs. It is fair to assume that also this trait was borrowed from Greek black- or red figured vases along with the main motifs, even if these small in-fill ornaments were treated with a distinct Etruscan touch of humour. In the later Etruscan period such elaboration disappears. Even if a new interest of depicting clearly indigenous divinities and heroes is remarkable for the period, we never find Etruscan every-day scenes or depictions of domestic animals on the engraved motifs of the mirrors. We have to move to the handle endings to find one such animal, the ram’s or, possibly, buck’s head, as discussed above.

It is perhaps in the theatrical implication of this period that we can find the first step in solving the puzzle of these absences. Later Etruscan artists knew their presumptive customers interest in everything Greek at the time when the inevitable process of Romanization had begun. The French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, discusses the social uses of cultural phenomena. He points out that people invest not only in means of money but...
also in prestigious “cultural goods” as part of a social strategy. In a time when leading citizens of Etruria found themselves to be dominated by a powerful but “uncivilised” neighbour they invested in their cultural heritage. An Etruscan upper-class woman, rich enough to buy an expensive bronze mirror, demonstrated by means of this purchase that she was part of a superior class and a citizen in a Hellenic world, however dominated. That is why she wanted it to be decorated with pictures that reflected this connection. Oxen, pigs, sheep, or any agricultural motif were not valid as symbols of her socio-cultural investments.

*Acknowledgements

I benefited, as always, from fruitful discussions with Prof. Larissa Bonfante, Dr. Michael Petterson and my distinguished colleagues at the Dept. of Classics in Göteborg. The participants of the Pecus-conference in Rome, September 11-15, 2002 contributed much to my knowledge and interest of the relation between man and animal. The personnel of the Swedish Institute in Rome are thanked for all the scientific generosity and kindness provided. My participation in the Conference was funded by the Royal Society for Sciences and Letters in Gothenburg for which I am very grateful.

1 Morgan 1985.
2 Wiman 2000-1, 112, discusses more thoroughly the importance of different subsystems of any given society and the interaction between these subsystems within the larger cultural system as a unit.
4 Cf. for instance the picture in The Etruscans cat.no. 166, 595.
5 For a picture see The Etruscans cat no. 171, 596.

References

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher/Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>