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Dernhelm or Éowyn:

An examination of the gender bias in Italian Archaeology

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Abstract

This master's thesis considers the interaction of gender bias in the area of Iron Age archaeology of Italy. An overview of feminist, gender, and mortuary archaeology provides the methodological framework for the assessment of how gender roles are analyzed and written about in Italian archaeology as well as select sites and case studies from the Eurasian steppes, Eastern Europe and Sweden. Existing and historical biases are highlighted and discussed in terms of their impact on interpretation of gender roles within ancient societies.

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1.0 Introduction

Whether it's the Amazons, the Valkyries, or the Viking shield maidens, female warriors have always captured the popular imagination. But even in ancient times, Amazons were viewed in different ways at different times by different people. In Homeric fiction, their femininity is mostly irrelevant, they are described using words that liken them to men and they are treated by the narrative in the same way that a group of male warriors would be treated (Hardwick 1990). But by the time of classical Greece, the ideal of femininity involved only the home sphere where a woman was a wife and a mother, therefore we have myths such as Hippolyte being raped by Theseus which "tames" her into an acceptable woman (Brown and Tyrell 1985; Hardwick 1990). Patriarchal societies have a vested interest in preserving heteronormative gender roles and one of the easiest ways to do this is to propagate the belief that women are meant to be the nurturers and homemakers *and that they always have been*. This idea that women have been passive observers that history has happened to while men have been the active force that drove history is not new and has been deeply entrenched into western society (Dahlberg 1981). Historians and archaeologists, of all genders, are in a position to challenge that belief but they too have been living with this ideal and have to some extent internalized it, whether consciously or unconsciously. Feminism and gender studies in all disciplines are seeking to undo this preconception but just like patriarchy, they come with their own set of political agendas. Ancient information has modern consequences and everything is political. In this sense political does not mean only related to the sphere of governmental politics but in the broader sense of how it relates to the power structures that we must navigate. The proponents of "traditional values" claim that historically speaking, women were in subservient rather than leadership roles and use examples from history and archaeology to show that this has always been so and therefore must

be the result of biology. These ideas are used to argue that only the heteronormative, nuclear family with a male head is valid. An academic community that refuses to engage with these stereotypes is unwittingly perpetuating them. In some ways this is a microcosm of a battle between those who say that people have agency and those who say biology is destiny. Scholarly publications do not exist in isolation, they are quoted by lawmakers who then use that ancient information to make modern laws.

Chapter one explores the impact that feminism has had on archaeology as well as presenting the methodological framework that currently underpins the discipline of mortuary archaeology. In chapter two, I discuss select sites and locations in Italian archaeology, using the Tomb of Suspended Aryballos (Tomb 6423, Doganaccia necropolis of Tarquinia, Italy) as a jumping off point to show how those sites and artefacts that do not fit into the heteronormative gender binary tend to be either ignored outright or downplay example of women as warriors and leaders, roles that deviate from the traditionally accepted gender roles.

In chapter three, we go beyond Italy and see how different geographical branches of archaeology deal with the idea of a female warrior. It is worth noting that the selection here is limited not by what evidence that exists but what is most relevant. I expected to have to dig deeply to find examples but instead I was startled by the plethora of female burials with weapons. Eurasia and Europe were chosen for their proximity to Italy and I attempted to stay close to the Iron Age. A more comprehensive view would include the Onna-bugeisha and the Onna-musha, martial women of feudal Japan, Fu hao, the wife of King Wu Ding and one of his chief military strategists, and many more. Others were excluded for lack of access to online materials as not everything has either not yet been digitized or is locked behind paywalls. Finally, I present some final thoughts and conclusions that I have drawn from this research. In

the end, my goal is not to persuade everyone reading this that female warriors and leaders existed, though that is firmly my belief, but to persuade that gender archaeology principles can and should be applied on a regular basis so that we can keep an open mind and interpret finds on their own basis and be comfortable with nuance and ambiguity even when it doesn't match our preconception.

2.0 Chapter One

2.1 History of gender archaeology

To understand why gender archaeology is such a contentious issue, it is important to consider its origins. Broadly speaking, there were three waves of feminism. The first was the suffragette movement from 1880-1920 which was focused on women gaining legal status of personhood as well as voting rights. The second wave was in the 1960s and during this time women worked to gain additional rights in terms of equal opportunities of employment, reproductive rights and an overall push for equality. Ideologically, there was an examination of the patriarchal structures in society including the academic sphere and how it was impacted by androcentrism. The third wave started in the 1990s and its primary ideological concern is an examination of how the female experience is created and there is in fact no universal female experience because of cultural and personal factors that impact each person differently. The second wave of the feminist movement of the 1960s translated into academic discourse in the 1970s (Sørensen, 2000). As women attended post-secondary education in the 1960s and 1970s and then joined the workforce at an increasing rate, the demographics of archaeologists began to shift and as a result of new perspectives and life experiences, new conversations were being had.

The first work that criticised the application of the gender binary in archaeology came from Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector in 1984 who posited that archeologists assumed that the gender roles of their own society were universal and imposed by biology (Gilchrist 1999).

Prior to this, material interpretations did not prioritize gender based analysis or at best, did not apply a consistent methodology (Toms 1992). As an example, an excavation published in 1914 by Edouard Naville of a female grave in Abydos with a mace head hesitated to identify it

positively as a mace head despite its clear characteristics because it was buried with a woman; he would rather distrust an established morphology of an object than reconsider his preconceptions of weapons as burial goods reserved exclusively for men (Selover 2021). The image shows that the morphology is clear with very little damage and is consistent with similar artefacts and yet the lack of an unequivocal identification indicates that the unexpected provenance of a female grave was sufficient to challenge the excavator's faith in the classification but not to interrogate the expectations of sex specific burial goods and their associated implications of social standing and gender roles.

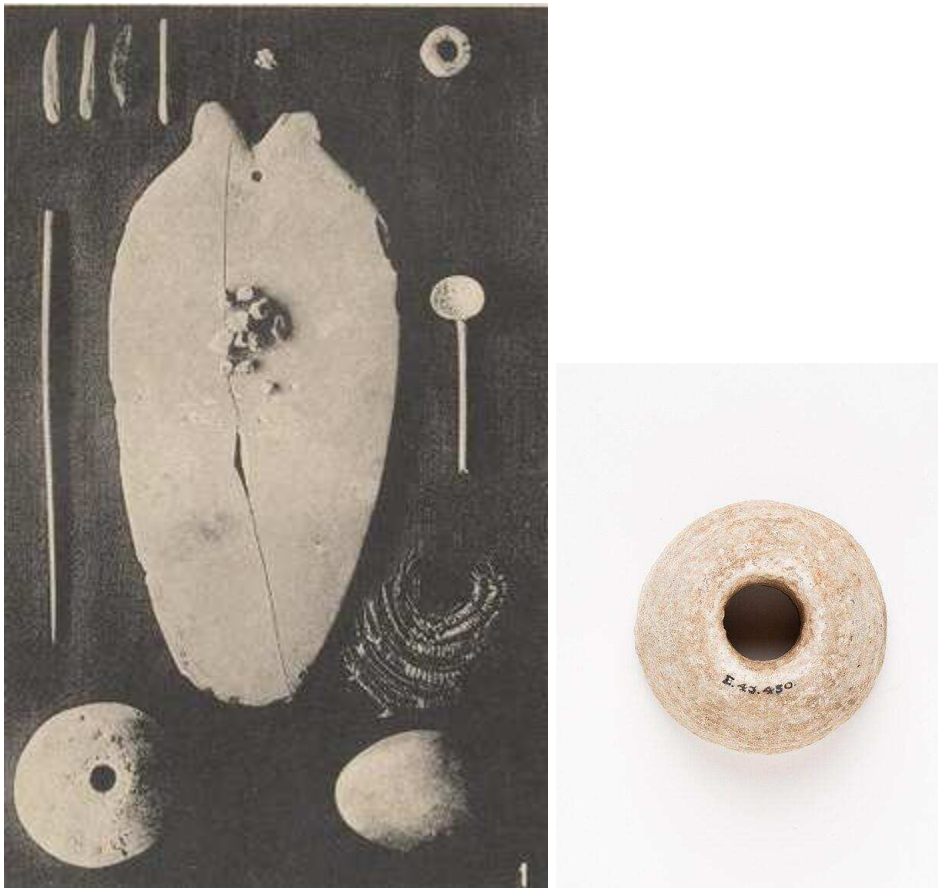


Fig 01 - Image of the mace head found in a cemetery in Abydos - bottom left corner of left image (from Neville 1914). Compared with an image of an Egyptian pre-dynastic stone macehead (Auckland Museum, CC BY 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons)

Two years later in 1916, Mace and Winlock when discussing the discovery of weapons in the tomb of Senebtisi, a woman, claimed that the presence of weapons in a woman's grave must either be a form of protection against supernatural forces or that in death women must lose their sex and become Osiris despite the fact that this did not fit the pattern that was clear in other burials from the same time period (Selover 2021; Mace and Winlock 1916). These anomalies prompted speculation on anything other than the possibility that either the gender norms were not immutable and that some individuals could and did exist outside of them. This exemplifies a very rigid pattern of thinking about men and women and their roles in society. While all humanities fields were grappling with the impact of feminism, archaeology as a discipline lagged behind others in addressing this issue (Conkey and Spector 1984). There were attempts to change this state of affairs including a speech by Kathleen Kenyon to Oxford University in 1969. In 1979 a TAG (Theoretical Archaeology Group) conference panel called *Were They All Men?* included discussions around gender and in the same year, Norwegian and Danish professional gatherings involved feminist commentary on field disparity (Sørensen 2000). There was a growing awareness of the lack of equity in the job field. Because women were often excluded from committees, and thus official networking opportunities, they created their own, even though they were not recognized as such (Sørensen 2000) but proposals by early feminist archaeologists such as Nancy Tanner and Adrienne Zihlman were dismissed or ignored (Conkey and Spector 1984). Little attention was given to women's activities and worldviews with proposed power structures mirroring those of the archaeologists' culture rather than what might be presented by the findings (Dahlberg 1981). The western view of gender was being applied backwards in time to other

cultures and for female archaeologists, a lot of work needed to be done to compensate for this problem.

2.2 The Three Waves of Feminism in Archaeology

Like feminism in the mainstream context, feminism in archaeology also had three stages. The first stage of feminist archaeology sought to redress the invisibility of women, not only in the historical record, but also as archaeologists. There is certainly no shortage of “fathers” of archaeology but women’s contributions and participation were systematically ignored (Sørensen 2000). But that doesn’t mean there weren’t any and many of those women were reclaimed by the field and honored for their contributions. Some of the most notable names include Gertrude Caton-Thompson who worked in the Fayyum region and provided proof of the Nabtu civilization of great Zimbabwe; Dame Kathleen Kenyon and her Jericho trench, and Mary Leakey’s work at Olduvai Gorge and Laetoli footprints dating back almost 4,000,000 years (Kehoe and Levine 1996). During their lifetimes, these women faced significant challenges to their scholarship and some did what they could to circumvent the misogyny of the field. For example, when Caton-Thompson investigated Great Zimbabwe in 1928 at the behest of the British Academy, her team was formed of only women including Kathleen Kenyon, a highly unusual if not unique situation. Later on, she had a significant impact on the career of Mary Leakey when she hired her to provide the illustrations for *The Desert Fayum*, cataloguing her work on the Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic sites across the Fayum north shore in Egypt (Morrell 1995). But despite her great accomplishments, she was not always treated with respect. Great Zimbabwe was initially touted

as a remnant of a lost, non-African civilization for reasons that were partly economic and partly racist.



Fig 02 - Excavation from Great Zimbabwe between 1890-1925 courtesy of Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons from the United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division

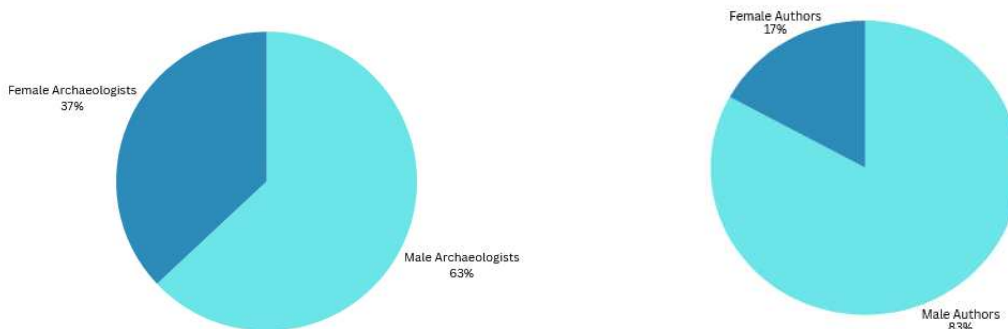
Cecil John Rhodes was a businessman operating in the area at the time and needed an excuse to seize the land for his newly established British South Africa Company and claimed that he was “saving” it for the civilized world as it could not possibly be the work of any African peoples (Boshoff 2017). Caton-Thompson was eventually called in to arbitrate between those who favoured the African population and those who championed outside builders. She decided for the local tradition and though there were some challengers, her meticulous methodology allowed the verdict to stand. Nonetheless, there were some who refused to accept her findings and she even received death threats from other archaeologists (Clark 1985).

Overall, scholarship tradition at this time was centered around men (Conkey and Spector 1984) and women were underrepresented and sometimes internalized the androcentric views (Sørensen 2000). This meant that even if female archaeologists were working at a site, they were still viewing finds through a lens of understanding that included certain expectations of gender roles. Tasks that are associated with “women’s work” either did not receive attention or were seen as less important to the overall understanding of the site (Rubio 2011). In response, women tended to specialize and engage in research in areas ignored by men as traditionally feminine such as textiles, ceramics, jewellery, art (Sørensen 2000).

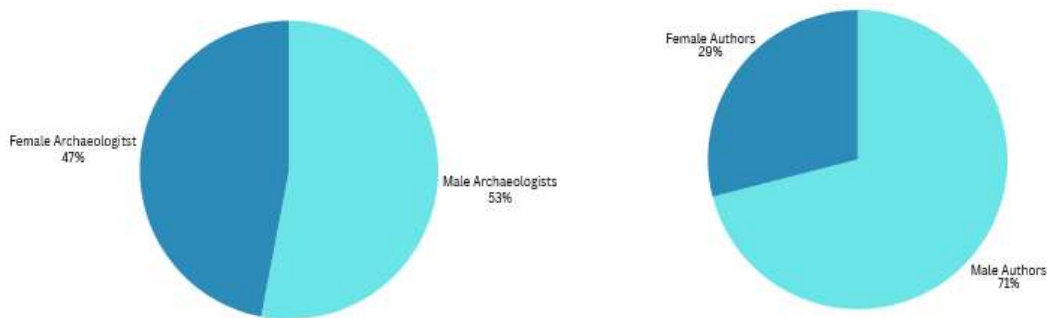
A disproportionate number of women were pushed out to academically marginalized positions (Patterson 2001). Despite the fact that in places such as the UK and the US, the numbers of female and male archaeologists are nearly even, a recent analysis of articles published in the journal *Antiquity* between 2015 and 2020 showed that women are published at roughly half the rate that men are (Hanscam & Witcher 2023). Another study, performed in 2020 which tracked multiple journals between 2007-2016, showed that men are listed as the author or the first author 62% of articles in 16 out of 21 of the journals, with one journal having a 79% male authorship (Heath-Stout 2020). Of the remaining five, only one had a less than 49% male authorship for an overall average of 36% female authorship. Between 1967 and 1990, only 17% of articles in *Historical Archaeology* were written by women, despite 37% female membership, and for *American Antiquity* the figure was 11% despite 34% membership (Cullen 1996). Between 1990 and 2013, for the major journals in the US, 29% of articles were written by women or had a woman as the lead writer even though there appears to be a near parity of archaeologists of 53% male and 47% female (Bardolph 2014). Clearly, while there has been an improvement, the numbers are still uneven. Despite the fact that more women are working in the

field, the ratios of authors are not on par. In terms of academic appointments, women were and continue to be under-represented. For example, in the period from 2004-2014 at the University College London Institute of Archaeology, women made up only 27% of the permanent staff (Hamilton 2014). While there are variations in specialities, overall women continue to be less likely to be hired for academic positions and when they are, they are hired at lower levels than men (Hutson, Castro, and Athie Teruel 2025). Publishing and professorship are only two metrics that can be used to assess the status of women within archaeology and though a full discussion of this issue is far outside the scope of the current work, the fact that they both point to a significant disparity is telling.

1967 - 1990



1990 - 2013



2007 - 2016

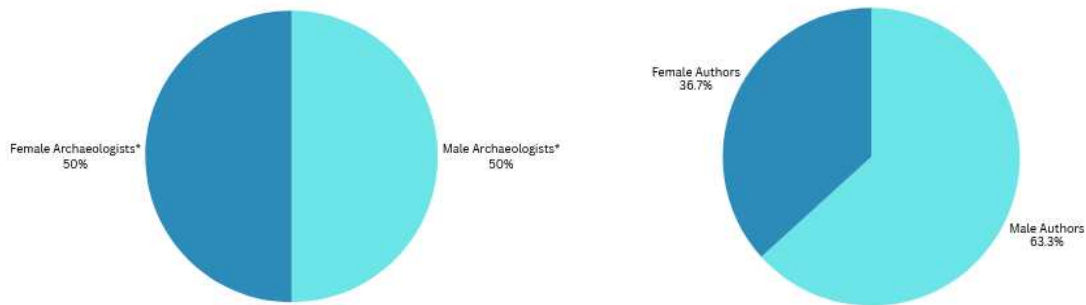


Fig 03 - Approximate comparisons of the gender split between archaeologists and authors in Archaeological publications. *the number is set at 50/50 as there are 21 journals covered in both USA and the UK and no available estimates of total numbers therefore this is based on the claim of parity from Hanscam & Witcher 2023 (Elaboration by the Author from Hanscam & Witcher 2023; Cullen 1996; Bardolph 2014)

Improving the visibility of women in antiquity has also met with mixed results. Though there are now books and articles dedicated entirely to women and their roles, in instances where a book describes an entire culture, it will likely include a chapter describing the female context (Moen 2019). This conveys the message that the male is the default and women are a special interest rather than a part of the overall process. Rather than seeing women's roles as an integrated part of society, they are seen as a niche interest that only needs to be examined if there is a specific research question. There also seems to be a trend of women being primarily analyzed within the context of the home while men are assessed within the totality of society (Varterresian 2014). In general, it feels as though the past is a man's world and women just happen to be living in it.

The second stage of feminism involved addressing the manner in which the patriarchy influenced the interpretation of the material past. It has long been acknowledged that bias on the

part of the researcher has the potential to translate into a predilection to make assumptions about the past. While the end of the last century brought a period of self-reflection in how gender was approached in archaeology, it took longer in Italy than anywhere else including in Etruscan archaeology (O'Donoghue 2016, Gennaro 2016 and Spivey 1991). 19th century archaeology was heavily influenced by Livy and other classical authors and as a result certain perceptions of Etruscan women took root early on (O'Donoghue 2016). Because Italy tends to be a conservative country with strong patriarchal structures, it is likely that feminist archaeology with its explicitly political agenda was seen with a distrustful eye. Though there are different nuances of patriarchy, in general it describes a system in which there is an unequal access to power with men being disproportionately in positions of power, influence, and prestige. According to 2018 research by the Department for Equal Opportunities of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Italians “show a strong adherence to gender stereotypes, which focus mainly on maternity-related factors, the roots of which therefore go beyond the boundaries of the labour market and refer to personal/family choices” (Aloè, Corsi & Zacchia, 2025 p 458). 30% of respondents believed that women can only be fully fulfilled through motherhood, and 44% believe that the primary responsibility for caring for the household falls to women even if they work. Two recent articles examining the position of women in Italian workplaces, specifically journalism and accounting, show that overall, women have fewer economic opportunities than men. Christian Lamour argues that women in Italian journalism are less likely to be employed in top positions but also those that are perceived to be stepping out of gender roles of what should be women's topics routinely face backlash (Lamour 2025). Similarly, Galizzi, McBride, and Sibon point to a persistent patriarchy which has resulted in women in Italy being placed lower in the hierarchy of accounting as compared to those of other European countries (Galizzi, McBride

and Sibon 2024). Outside the economic sphere, there has been a rise in the opposition to the push for equality in Italy (Shvanyukova 2022). Using a number of metrics such as feminism, queer rights, and the prevalence of gender studies, Shvanyukova argues that there is a clear and present backlash aimed at restoring patriarchal values from multiple sources including Men's Rights Activists and the Catholic Church. The church has certainly not been secretive in their campaign for traditional family values and against feminist philosophies such as access to reproductive care and abortion. Violence against women in Italy has been the subject of multiple studies. In the Santambrogio et al study that looked at both Italian and international rates of victimization within an intimate relationship, approximately 21% of Italian women have experienced sexual violence and 20.2% have experienced physical violence (Santambrogio et al 2025). In 2024, 96 out of the total 314 murders in Italy were perpetrated by a family member or spouse against a woman (Ferla 2025). That means that one in five women are victims of domestic violence and one in three murders are domestic related. While nearly all studies show that these signs of patriarchy are slowly diminishing, Italian society still clings to patriarchal values.

The third stage of feminism was to challenge one of the foundations of patriarchy, the gender binary. The gender binary in modern European society came from the European Enlightenment period during the 17th and 18th centuries (Brown 2024). The assumption is that the biological characteristics translate into socio-cultural gender roles and that those roles, because they are biologically dictated, are fixed and unchanging. "In academia, the assumption of a universal, gendered division of labour still persists... it rests on assumptions more than on the material record and is traceable to nineteenth-century ideals" (Moen 2019, p. 215). These assumptions are the foundations of interpretation of societies thousands of years in the past and the belief that the biological binary between male and female dictates abilities, behaviours and

capabilities is both reinforced by assumptions about past societies and reinforces how we approach the issue in the present (Moen 2019). When an archaeologist believes that a certain population subset, be it based in sex, ethnicity, or any other biological criteria, is automatically relegated to certain roles, it is more likely that any anomalies are either discarded or recontextualised in a way that adheres to that ideology. In 1966, a major conference took place called Man the Hunter and though it was largely focused on cultural anthropology, its impact spread well outside the anthropological field and into archaeological thought (Eriksen & Nielsen 2001). In reality, the “Man the Hunter” paradigm is outmoded; recent ethnographic studies show that 79% of cultures include female hunters (Anderson et al 2023). The belief of the active male and the passive female has been heavily criticized and yet continues to be prevalent in many circles. In that context, women are always seen as relegated to certain roles and biological characteristics are cited as the reason without an interrogation of whether those characteristics were viewed similarly by the culture being examined. It also imposes a homogeneity on the population that suggests that everyone adhered to the same beliefs about gender roles without regard to the fact that in many instances of even the most rigid societies, outliers existed. England’s Victorian society had very firm ideas about a woman’s place and it was not on the throne. Despite this, Queen Victoria is the second longest British monarch being surpassed only by another female ruler, Queen Elizabeth II.

The proponents of the gender binary claim that any evidence to the contrary is actually pathologies and false equivalencies from other species that are being transposed to push an agenda (Weiss 2024). Furthermore, the same paper states that the claim that biological sex is on a continuum is because the identifying features are on a continuum rather than discrete variables and that this is a failure of methodology. For example, one of the features of pelvic sex

estimation is the greater sciatic notch. The wider and more open it is, the more confident the assessor can be that it belongs to a female but there are only approximate guidelines. More than 60° means female, less than 30° means male but that leaves a significant overlap where the assessor relies on their own experience and knowledge (White, Black, and Folkens 2011). By advancing our understanding of osteology, the identification rate which is currently at 97% for complete samples will increase. Current rubrics generally suggest that skeletons be separated into five categories: probably male, possibly male, undetermined, likely female and probably female. By increasing our knowledge, only two categories would be required - male and female and any ambiguity about gender roles would be put to rest. Sex is not determined only from bones. Soft tissue has also been used to suggest that there is a clear delineation but despite initial studies that suggest that there are differences in male and female brains, presence, magnitude, and direction of significant sex differences strongly depend on the measurement applied (Luders and Kurth 2020). In addition, any differences in structure do not appear to have a correlating effect on behaviour or thought pattern (Joel 2011). Ancient DNA (aDNA) is becoming a more prevalent technique and the presence of either XX or XY chromosomes is sometimes used to determine sex, though it is not often available due to preservation issues. It is also not infallible since there are people who have a mismatch between their chromosomes and their morphology suggesting that sex is more nuanced than a simple binary. However, since chromosome analysis was not available to ancient peoples, it would be likely that the shape of genitalia in babies would be their primary source of sex determination. Nonetheless, some continue to argue that only two sexes are possible and that there needs not be a separation between sex and gender (Weiss 2024). In contrast, many archeology and anthropology professional associations have decoupled sex and gender. For example, the British Association for Biological Anthropology and

Osteoarchaeology put out a statement on sex estimation declaring that “Gender identity and biological sex, though related, are not synonymous for each other and are treated as such throughout this statement” (British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology 2022). In general, there appears to be agreement within archaeology that sex is a biological characteristic and gender is a socio-cultural construct and that both are on a continuum rather than existing as discrete units. There is also increased recognition of intersex individuals who make up roughly 2% of the population (Stratton 2016). Despite that, this has not translated to a shift in methodology and the models of interpretation remain firmly fixed in the binary as will be explored later in this thesis (Moen 2019).

As the ideas of feminist archaeology were refined, a split occurred. Feminist archaeology remained focused on rectifying the gaps of androcentric archaeology while gender archaeology emerged as a branch focused on how gender is used in construction of an identity and the relationship between those of different genders (Sørensen 2006). Gender archaeology has reached a point where intersectionality is the new focus. It is the combination of a series of characteristics such as race, sex, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other facets that combine to provide a more complete image of the individual and generalities, while not eliminated, are severely curtailed to account for the variability of experience (Rubio 2011). We negotiate our identities on the basis of certain characteristics that the circumstances that we live in deems significant and these characteristics can be fluid. For example, a child will grow to an adult and while they are still classified as a child of their parents, at certain ages there will need to be negotiations with not only what that means in their relationship with their parents but also with the rest of the world. While a child, they are expected to be obedient to their parents or guardians but the extent of that obedience will vary between and even within cultures. As

children age, they may experience different restrictions. Those restrictions are not only limited to age however, there are families that have different rules for male children vs female children or rules may be adjusted for the perceived maturity of the child regardless of their age. In that sense, age is not the only factor that contributes to their role within the family. As a child, there are certain environments such as bars that may be off limits to them depending on where and when in the world they live. For example, in Italy children are permitted in bars even though the drinking age is 18 but this does not hold true in Canada and minors will not be permitted entry into bars even if they are not ordering alcoholic beverages. However, a 17 year old living in Barbados prior to 2021 would be served without question since their drinking age was only raised to 18 that year (Henry 2021). While age is a biological characteristic, the meaning of it changes depending on where and when the person lives and that change can be affected by other characteristics.

There is a preconception that archaeology as a whole is the province of the mainstream archaeologist but that queer archaeology is a concern for queer archeologists, gender archaeology is for women, etc (Brown 2024). This sort of thinking prioritizes straight, white, cis males as the default archaeologists and marginalizes any interests outside of that. Therefore, both feminist archaeology and gender archaeology continue to be pushed to the periphery and marginalized; “gender archaeology has yet to become an integral and assumed part of archaeology’s foundational principles and remains at the periphery of disciplinary research. As such, the assumption that this heteronormative framework is both universal and natural remains well entrenched in archaeological mortuary analysis” (Brown 2024 p 18). The result is that interpretation of material as it pertains to gender roles becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. It leads to a feedback loop where because most burials with weapons are male, then any burial with

weapons where sex is not identifiable is categorized as male and added to the corpus of knowledge that proves that most burials with weapons are male. In addition, as early as 1972, archaeologists have raised the concern that sexing skeletons has skewed towards the male (Weiss 1972).

It is important to consider what role the structures of the gender binary fulfill within a society. Once a society becomes stratified, access to power, prestige and authority is limited to a select few but this results in a tension between those groups that have the access and those that do not that must be resolved in order for the society to continue to function. As a result, a moral system must be developed that not only validates the restriction of access but also unites the whole, often by using another marginalized group as a common enemy (Robb 2013). One theory of the moral system among pre-roman Italic people was based both gender and class and used the warrior ideal of defending the group and was embodied in the male warrior prowess but because it was entangled with maleness, provided men with supremacy over women while women were bound to the system through class distinction in which some women could still claim superiority over others and choose to propagate the system for their own benefit (Robb 2013). This would suggest that the path to authority was through warrior status and it's possible that some women either pursued that path through literal or symbolic means resulting in burial with weapons. One of the ways that this kind of society may manifest is a general split between men and women but with variations as individuals apply their agency to negotiate their status resulting in some overlap.

2.3 Mortuary Archaeology

One of the guiding principles of mortuary archaeology is that the circumstances of a burial can tell us about a past culture and can provide information about the role and social identity of the deceased. While this very general statement is certainly true, the application of it has to be nuanced and careful and take into consideration a number of caveats. The first is that the majority of people are not buried in places that archaeology has access to (Stratton 2016). Whether it's because their burials were not done in a manner that led to the preservation of their remains or because they have yet to be discovered, most of the people who died in antiquity are not available for archaeologists to study. For example, given that in many places up to half of the population died before reaching the age of five but burials of children that young are scarce, there is a category of people that are significantly underrepresented in the material record (Nijboer 2016). The criteria of who is chosen for burial vs who is not will likely remain a mystery because we cannot examine what is not there. In addition, the burials that are located are often those that were elaborate and which were intentionally preserved, likely belonging to the elite, so that our view of any society tends to be "top heavy" (Orser 2011). Simple burials often involve the use of perishable materials such as textiles or maybe even wood to encompass the deceased. Tombs that are built of stone, marble or other longlasting materials have a longer life, allowing for greater chance of discovery. In addition, early archaeology was more focused on the sensational burials rather than the mundane and methodology was not as rigorous as it is today with the result that not only were many non-elite burials not excavated even some elite class artefacts lack context and proper documentation. One very well known example is Hisarlık, better known for its mythical name of Troy. Heinrich Schliemann was so anxious to get to the riches of the famed city that he used destructive techniques and bulldozed through large portions

of the site without appropriate documentation including his intended target: the layer that contained Troy during the time presented in the Iliad (Schuchhardt 2014). Even the graves that are located and properly excavated and documented can be difficult to interpret correctly. A burial is a form of a rite which has not only the practical application of the disposal of a body but also many symbolic characteristics and components. The positioning of the body, the manner of disposal, the context in which the person is buried, the number of people included per burial and the grave goods that accompany them all have the potential to provide information but all require careful interpretation. Some items are only created for the express purpose of the funerary rite and have a limited connection to the deceased's life (Triozi 2021). The selection of which goods are included falls to the people left behind and whether or not they take into consideration the wishes of the deceased person cannot be known. This remains true even today; there is no shortage of examples where trans individuals are stripped of their trans identity and returned to the gender they were assigned to at birth by family members; people who are able to negotiate their identity while alive, lose that ability when dead and unless the person arranging their burial is sympathetic to their gender expression, the deceased have no control over how they will be permanently viewed from then on (Whitstone 2022).

In addition, “[t]here is no necessary correlation between the burial of an object with a specific human body and the use, meaning, or personhood of that object or human being during their lifetime” (Marshall 2013: 216). There are many reasons why grave goods or even the presentation of the body is not reflective of who they were in life. Even with textual evidence from a culture, it's hard to determine the ideology that surrounds the burial rite. For example, we know that the religion of ancient Egypt generally considered the death of a king as a transformative event but the exact details of what Egyptians believed changed over the more than

three millennia of Egypt's existence (Marshall 2021). In addition, what happened to the king did not necessarily happen to his subjects as they underwent different rituals (Davino 2019). Some items may be symbolic of the deceased's role in life, some may have a ritual meaning for the transition from living to dead and some may simply be a reflection of something that the deceased liked in life. Tutankhamun, a king of the eighteenth Egyptian dynasty was buried with his childhood clothing that was adorned with ducks (McGovern 2024). Is there a symbolic meaning to these images, or do they simply preserve the memory of a little boy who liked ducks?



Fig 04 - Image of Tutenkhamun's robe with embroidered ducks
Taken from online lecture by Dr. Rosalind Janssen
Original at the Cairo Museum

Each person's social identity is a mixture of factors including, but not limited to, social class, age, wealth, gender, ethnicity, marital and parental status, accomplishments, etc. Not all cultures place value on all of these in the construction of an identity and identities can be fluid when circumstances change. In some cultures in parts of Africa, women beyond the child bearing age are assigned the same classification as males and infants under two followed entirely different burial rituals and Papua New Guinea has a gender identity system that is determined by the ingestion of specific fluids rather than physical morphology and can vary over a person's

lifetime (Toms 1998). In addition, the transition from life to death creates a new identity for the deceased and grave goods provide a commentary of the environment in which power and identity is constructed (Stratton 2016)

One of the other main issues is that of preservation, not just of the body but also of certain types of items. Wood, textiles, and foodstuffs do not last long except in some very specific circumstances and while some residue may remain, sometimes archaeologists don't even know that there was something there that is now missing (Triozi 2021). In some cases, items can be reconstructed based on context clues left behind the way an archaeologist can tell that a hut once existed by the postholes left behind, or if there are texts that discuss offerings left behind but in other cases, archaeologists might not even know that there was something there that no longer is present.

For the items that are recovered, there is always the possibility that the function of an object can be misunderstood or even not understood at all. There is a common joke that anything that an archaeologist cannot identify is obviously ceremonial but the truth is that ancient people were just as resourceful and creative as people are today and invented many items to help with day to day tasks. Some of these tasks are no longer performed, or no longer performed in the same way and so the tools and items are unfamiliar to those attempting to interpret them. And even if we do identify them, it is not always clear if that which we have identified, we have done so correctly and applied the correct understanding of its use (Toms 1998). For example, a knife has the potential for many different uses. It can be used to prepare food, it could be a weapon, it might be reserved for the cutting of ritual objects, or it might even be strictly ceremonial the way that a mace is carried into the Canadian House of Commons to represent the authority of the

people in the chamber. There are some indications for some objects. If there is a pattern of wear, then chances are the object was functional or if the materials that the object is made out of are appropriate for a specific function. For example, the abovementioned mace is made out of gold, silver, and other precious materials which make it impractical for any sort of warfare. The challenge then is to determine how much of the grave goods represent day to day life and how much is symbolic or performative (Selover 2021).

This question is further complicated by the fact that items buried with the deceased are *de facto* removed from society and this, too, can pose further questions about the people conducting the burial. Are these items removed because the people can afford to do so? Or at least they wish to be perceived as being able to do so. By contrast, is the manner of burial so important in this culture that even those for whom the removal of such an item is a hardship feel compelled to do so because of ideology? These are all questions that may not be able to be answered with the limited information that archaeologists often have to contend with.

One way of discerning meaning from grave goods is to look at patterns. If a certain group of people are consistently buried with the same or similar goods, then there is a correlation between the meaning of the items and the group they are associated with though the meaning and the nature of the relationship can still be difficult to ascertain. What is important to remember is that ambiguity is a completely valid scientific factor (Jordan 2016). Cultures, like the people they are made up of, are complex, shifting and sometimes contradictory concepts. They are not homogenous and within each culture there are sub-cultures and even counter-cultures. What's more, multiple factors can affect the inclusion or exclusion of specific grave goods. By using patterns, archaeologists can not only come with a hypothesis but also to test if the hypothesis holds true in other circumstances. But in order to get a clear picture of what characteristics result

in what mortuary practices, multivariate processes must be used, otherwise the results tend to oversimplify the situation and place precedence on one characteristic over the others. By using multivariate analysis, the archaeologist can determine which characteristics covary, how often, and what other factors can cause this relationship (McCall 2008). For example, chariots were found in elite burials from 775–750 BCE until circa 575 BCE throughout Etruria in both male and female burials (Emiliozzi 2014). Though the chariot was initially posited to be related to a male warrior identity, the finding it with female burials required an additional look. By considering variables outside of gender, it was determined that in this circumstance, the chariot was a status symbol associated with elite burials rather than an indication of a gender role (Murray 2016).

Aside from burial goods, any remains that are preserved can also provide valuable information. Sex, age, pathologies and even occupational markers can all be determined from osteological analysis but there are some important caveats here. Not all burial practices leave behind a complete skeleton. Cremation was very popular in central-northern (Cavazzuti *et al.* 2022). Italy at various points and though ancient cremation is not as complete as modern techniques, it was nonetheless a very destructive technique which leaves little for analysis. Even the presence of a complete skeleton is not a guarantee for a fully confident sex estimation because the markers that are used exist on a continuum. For example, one of the sex indicators characteristics is the expression of the curve of the greater sciatic notch in the os coxae (hip bone). There are no numerical values assigned to the curve so an osteologist has to estimate the level of expression as compared to a chart.

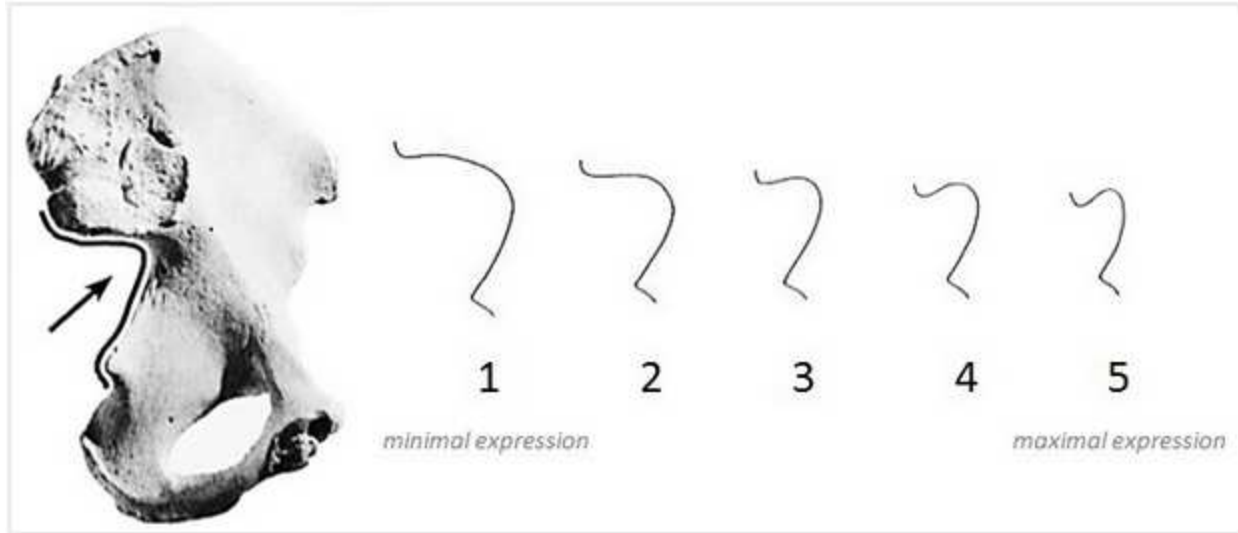


Fig 05 - The Human Bone Manual (White and Folkens 2005).

The most accurate measurement of biological sex is the Phenice Method which is correct in approximately 96% of cases (White, Black, and Folkens 2011). It requires an undamaged pelvic girdle so that the ventral arc, the subpubic concavity, and the ischiopubic ramus ridge can be evaluated together and essentially cross-referenced against each other. If all three point to the morphology most associated with a specific sex, then the skeleton can be considered confidently assessed. Other techniques include the morphology of the cranium as well as long-bone measurements but they have a lower rate of accuracy and also require the presence of undamaged skeletal portions. Because of the subjectivity of some of these techniques, there is room for bias based error. The late neolithic and copper age cemetery of Durankulak in Bulgaria illustrates well the limitations of osteological sex assessments and how they are subject to interpretation bias (Stratton 2016). The initial examination seemed to show a very strong correlation between gender and grave contexts. Males were buried with antlers, stone, and copper and were placed in a supine position. Females were buried with jewelry and were placed

flexed and on the side. However, only confidently sexed skeletons were included in the initial analysis. Once non-confidently sexed individuals were added strong contradictions appeared.

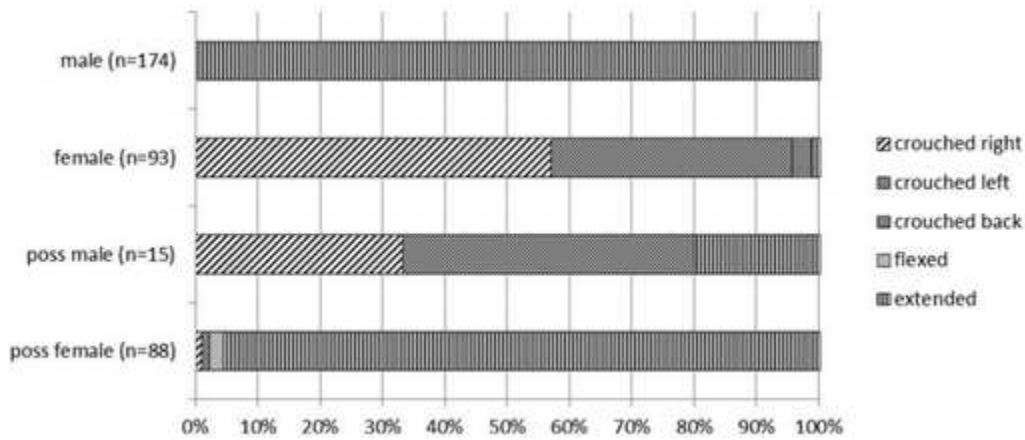


Fig 06 - A comparison of burial positions in confidently and non-confidently sexed individuals (Stratton 2016)

When the possibly female and possibly male skeletons were added, 95% of possible females were placed in a supine position and 80% of possible males were flexed. This is far beyond what would be explained by incorrect osteological assessment and an investigation ensued to determine the cause. Analysis acknowledged the duality by differentiation between sex based on osteology and sex based on material remains and exposed a problem within methodology: for those who were unconfidently sexed, the material and osteological error was between 92%-93% and led to the conclusion that the level of confidence was likely to have been conferred by the material context within which the remains were found (Stratton 2016). If the remains were found in the supine position and were tending towards male, then the assessment was elevated from non-confident to confident by the researcher through confirmation bias. Since males were supine and this skeleton has some male markers and is supine, then it must be male. Likely without even realizing it, the person performing the estimations was influenced by their knowledge of burial customs and it skewed their interpretation of the remains.

Not only are gender markers subjective, but bones are living material and change over a person's lifetime. Though there are some osteologists who claim to be able to sex the remains of pre-pubescent children, most agree that prior to the changes wrought by puberty, the skeletons of males and females are too similar for meaningful differentiation (White, Black, and Folkens 2011). On the other end of the age spectrum, there are some indications that females acquire more robust features as they age leading to a less confident or even a mistaken identification but the extent of these changes is still in dispute (Garvin, Sholts and Mosca 2014. Nikita 2014, White, Black, and Folkens 2011). The issue of intersex people also has to be addressed. Only recently have people begun to consider how intersex people may show up in the osteological record and there are currently no widely accepted guidelines for the specific category within biological anthropology (Power 2020). In a recent (October 2025) article published by the American Journal of Biological Anthropology, some techniques to identify possibly intersex individuals are presented but they have yet to be thoroughly field tested and the author explicitly states that technology is not at this time able to test for all combinations of sex characteristics (Astorino 2025). Bioarchaeology then has several limits; small sample sizes, selective preservation of material, poor methodology of the past and sometimes present, and methodological limitations (Triozi 2021).

3.0 Chapter Two

3.1 The Italian Context

As a result of the sudden and diversified crisis that affected all of the Mediterranean area at the end of the bronze age ca 1200 BCE (Cline 2010), a territorial reorganization occurred in Italy. Settlement nucleation led to increasing complexity, as well as shared general aspects in material culture that then differentiated into the various cultures that inhabited Italy (Peroni 2004). Parts of northern and central Italy consolidated into proto- and then fully Villanovian cultures, which is believed by many to be the first stage of Etruscan material expression (Bietti Sestieri 2012). Metal production in Italy rose towards the end of the Bronze age and became regionally consolidated. In many places the ability to exploit the resources of not only metals and minerals but also luxury goods, and an effective utilization of trade routes became the basis for urbanization (Leighton 2014). Etruscan city states grew out of the organization of clans and great families into a loose confederation of interwoven centers whose leaders would choose a ruler (Naso 2000). Eventually, this culture would be subsumed into the Roman state partially through conquest and partially through cultural absorption (Ceccarell 2016).

The history of the “re-discovery” of the Etruscan culture by modern archaeologists is heavily influenced by the writings of ancient historians such as Livy, Pliny and Herodotus although the ancient authors could not even agree on the origin of the Etruscan people (Shipley 2017; Briquel 2014; Bietti Sestieri 2012) . Some considered them to be newcomers from the east and mythologized the Etruscan civilization, the consequences of which we continue to see today. Because 19th century archaeology was heavily influenced by these writers, certain perceptions took root early on, including those of the role of women (O’Donoghue 2016). For example,

Theopompus' famous passage from *Histories* has been mentioned in much of the academic discourse around the role of Etruscan women, and many scholars share similar reservations (Bonfante 1973, Spivey 1991, Shipley 2017, Gianni 2021). Theopompus wrote about the lives of Etruscan women using earlier sources and claimed that they had good hygiene and exercised in the nude along with their male counterparts, attended banquets where they performed toasts and reclined with both their husbands and with men they were not married to alike, liked to drink, were considered to be beautiful, they did not reject children regardless of who they sired them, which they sometimes did not know, and that female promiscuity and wife-swapping was common (Theopompus *Histories* 43). Much of this information has been challenged by scholars such as Bonfante. According to her, there is no evidence that suggests that women exercised among men, much less that they did so in the nude, however it is true that women attended sporting events alongside men (Bonfante 1973). The notion that women raised illegitimate children likely came from the custom that if a child was born to an Etruscan free woman and a slave, the child took the mother's name and was free; in Greece taking the mother's name indicates unknown paternity (Bonfante 1973). In addition, unlike the Greeks who practiced infanticide, Etruscans raised all children that were born to them (Gianni 2021). Though Theopompus' account contained multiple mischaracterizations of Etruscan women, these are the views that early archaeologists carried with them when building the early corpus of information. On the methodological side, in the Greek world gender divisions were less complicated, more uniform and were largely supported by osteological examinations (Spivey 1991) and so for archaeologists who had been trained in Greek sites and for whom the gender roles tended to coincide with the gender norms of their day, the assumption that these roles were the same in

3.2 Tomb of Suspended Aryballos

Tarquinia, along with Cerveteri, Vulci and Chiusi, is among the most famous burial sites of the Etruscan culture. In use from the 9th century to the first, this necropolis, also known as Monterozzi is home to approximately 6000 tombs, including such famous tombs as the Tomb of the Augurs from the sixth century BCE and the Tomb of the Leopards dated to the 5th century BCE (Turfa 2014). Tomb 6423 is a chamber tomb that was located intact in 2013 by a team from the university of Turin. The team published some preliminary remarks in 2016 describing the context of the find. It is part of the Doganaccia necropolis of Tarquinia and has a terminus ante quem date of 630-620 BC, placing it in the transition span between the orientaling and archaic periods (Mandolesi *et al.* 2016). It is covered by a mound with 5.3m diameter and is located within the *fossa* and abutting to the queen's tumulus. Inside, short *dromos* stairs lead to an underground chamber with a vestibule where an interred female and a cremated male rested on their own slabs of stone. It appears that this tomb existed beneath a location of continued Etruscan activity leading to its undisturbed state.

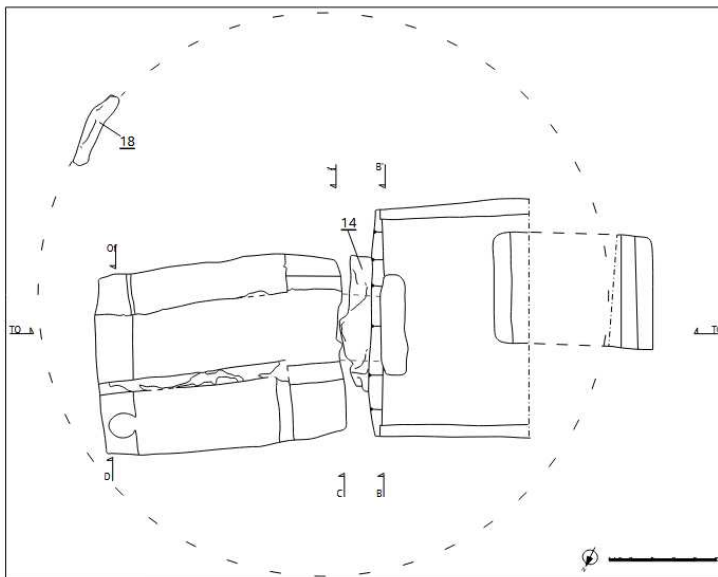


Fig 08 - Plan of Tomb 6423 (Mandolesi *et al.* 2016)



Fig 09 - View of the burial chamber (Mandolesi *et al.* 2016)

The tomb contained both open and closed ceramic containers associated with the practice of the banquet, made of fine and transitional bucchero ware including a hanging aryballos from which the tomb took its name. The art styles of the ceramics are able to provide a dating framework for the latest possible time of the find. There are chalices and banquet ware shapes such as *kylike* and *oinochoa* as well as some cutlery. Two of the *oinochoa* can be traced to the Vitelleschi Group in the Tarquinian group, specifically the Wolf Head painter, active in the early 6th century BCE (Mandolesi *et al.* 2016). The name The Tomb of the Suspended Aryballos comes from three perfume holders that had originally been placed on hooks on the back wall. They are adorned with running dogs on the body and clouds on the shoulder separated by checkered motifs. While the grave goods on the sides of the chamber have a fairly clear proximity association, there are some that were found in the middle of the chamber that could potentially accompany either person. Since the bodies were buried at different times, with the inhumation being prior to the cremation, the deposition groups are likely to be correlated to each

individual rather than be a composite deposit. Based on the dates of the grave goods, the female inhumation occurred first and was followed by the male cremation approximately a generation later. During the reopening, in addition to the remains and the grave goods, a painting was added to the back wall. It is described as red painted walls with lines that suggest a depiction of columns, a style that often marked a tomb as a house of the dead (Mandolesi 2014).

The female inhumation was accompanied by two particularly interesting types of objects. The first, and not unusual, was a *pyxis* that was used as a storage device for three needles as well as the remains of fabric. The association between female burials and the trappings of textile production has a longstanding history; the assumption is that female occupations in life translate to female burial goods (Toms 1998; Gleba 2017). The initial academic report from the excavation describes the finding of textile goods as “unique elements that distinguish the role of the deceased within domestic activities and project her into a dimension evocative of matronly legacies” (translated from Italian - original: “unici elementi che contraddistinguono il ruolo della defunta all’interno delle attività di ambito domestico e la proiettano in una dimensione evocativa di retaggi matronali” from Mandolesi *et al.* 2016, p. 20). What is not mentioned however, is the finding of a bronze spear laid on top of the woman’s body. We know that the spear exists. In Volume 16 of the Newsletter of the American Institute for Etruscan and Italic Studies, a publication of New York University, there is an article written by Alessandro Mandolesi, one of the lead researchers of the group involved in the study of this context, describing the significance of an unspoiled find of this magnitude which mentions the spear found on the slab beside the body of the woman and provided an image (Mandolesi 2014).



Fig 10 - An image of the female burial with a spear (Mandolesi 2014)

In the same newsletter there is another article about the Tomb of suspended Aryballos, this time written by Maria Rosa Lucidi, present at the excavation and also listed as a lead author of the subsequent academic article, where she describes the scene, “we could see the leg bones of the skeleton on the left bed with the tip of the spear laid at its feet” (Lucidi 2014 p. 7). In addition, Mandolesi gave an interview a few months earlier to Viterbo News which discussed the presence of the spear as well as the changing assumptions around it, “It is not usual to find a body of a woman with a spear, for this reason, at the beginning, it was believed to be the discovery of a warrior... The spear, most likely, had been placed as a symbol of union between the two deceased” (Pinna 2013). However, while the academic publication has extensive descriptions of the architecture of the tomb, the ceramics, the textiles, the painting and tomb decorations, and the conditions that the bodies were found in, it has no mention of the spear found with the female

burial. The lack of documentation in the official academic report means that it may be difficult for interested academics to locate and add to their corpus of research for interpretation.

The case of the Tomb of Suspended Aryballos is interesting in the way it exposes the lack of interrogation of the traditional gender roles that have been assigned universally among Etruscan burials. Initial interpretation based on material goods were that of an elite male, the media then extrapolated this assessment into a warrior prince, and then the skeletal remains were identified as female and the new interpretation became vague in media and non-existent in academic discourse; it seemed that the authors thought it “better to appeal to an unknown ritual than to acknowledge the potential of women’s power in the past” (Shipley 2016 p. 99).

3.3 The Regolini-Galassi tomb

The combination of a female inhumation and male cremation is not unique to the Tomb of the suspended Aryballos; it can be compared with one of the most famous tombs: the Regolini-Galassi tomb in nearby Caere, modern Cerveteri. Caere funerary contexts in the Orientalizing Period show a time of transitions (Riva 2006). Inhumation becomes the more dominant form of burial and the burial structures themselves expand from single or double trench and pit graves into trench graves suitable for multiple burials or, like the Regolini-Galassi tomb, chamber tombs with additional architectural features. The tomb was originally discovered intact by Vincenzo Galassi, a general and Alessandro Regolini, the archpriest of Cerveteri in 1836 and in 1841, its contents were published by Luigi Grifi. It is to date possibly one of the most famous tombs with spectacular finds that are displayed in the Gregorian Etruscan Museum in the Vatican along with reconstructions that allow people to virtually tour the site. The tomb consists of a long

dromos that also serves as an antichamber with two oval side chambers dug out just before the connection to the principal burial chamber. The main burial was a female inhumation. Her high rank is evidenced by the wealth of the burial goods that surround her including a golden pectoral embossed with decorations of a variety of animals, a banqueting set, fibulae, jewelry and a series of shields that were hung up on the wall (Grifi 1841). While shields may be considered as part of a military assemblage, these are parade shields and too fragile to be a practical weapons therefore are more likely a symbolic item or a luxury item indicating high status (Winther 1997). The deposition also includes weaving equipment made of silver, likely more symbolic than functional (Hayes 2000). A male cremation was placed in one of the nearby oval chambers. Additional luxury items were also included in the tomb but are difficult to attribute to either remains due to a partial collapse that occurred during excavation (Hayes 2000).

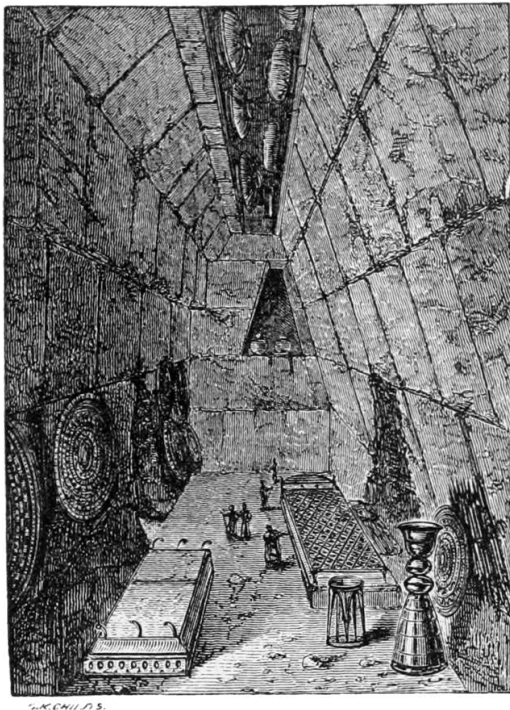


Fig 11 - View of principal Chamber in the Regolini-Galassi tomb in Caere from figure number 6 from the book *Rude Stone Monuments* (1872)

By James Fergusson (1808–1886)



Fig 12 - Bronze Parade Shield found in the Regolini-Galassi tomb

Image made available into the public domain by Gary Lee Todd, Ph.D.

Despite the presence of both male and female remains and no clear indication of the relationship between the two, there is no weapon of any sorts placed near or on the body of the female. This may be attributed to either regional differences, a different relationship between the two people inside the Regolini-Galassi tomb than the two people in the Tomb of the Suspended Aryballos, another unknown reason, or because there was no practice of symbolically joining two people through weapons. When Malinesi gives the interview about the Tomb of the Suspended Aryballos, it is unclear from the article on what basis the assertion is made that the placing of the spear on the body of the female is a symbol of unity between the two people, therefore it is hard to test in order to confirm or deny the claim. There have been no further publications that discuss the weapon and so a significant find with implications on the gender roles in Etruscan culture is not part of the academic corpus. The more salient question is whether this is a one off or part of a systemic issue. Though it is impossible to know if any other finds were omitted from publication, we can take a look at studies that consider gender issues and assess the relationship between burial goods and sex. In broad terms, is there an exclusively male artefact type or do overlaps exist, with a focus on weapons since they are most intrinsically tied to specific gender roles in the mainstream thought of Italian archaeology.

3.4 Villanovian Burials

Since the Tomb of the Suspended Aryballos is in Tarquinia, are there any other burials in this area that have provided a more complicated image of the correlation between gender and grave goods? As early as the Villanovan era, there have been indications that the situation is not

as simple as it may be presented. In 1998, Judith Toms performed an extensive analysis of published burials that included grave goods. She surveyed 915 tombs of the Villanovian cultural group ca. 900-720 BCE looking for patterns of recurrence to identify sets of artefacts that are exclusive to each other. Generally speaking there was a split where burials that contained weapons, did not contain spinning equipment. The one tomb that contained both also showed evidence of robbery and disturbances due to plowing and therefore it is not certain if the items are found *in-situ* or if there was cross-contamination and two different burials were co-mingled. This split is maintained throughout Villanovan contexts across geography, time, and class lines and therefore on the surface seems to indicate that there are two roles present. Early archaeologists assigned the roles along gender lines (Stratton 2016). However, the examination of the bones that accompany the grave goods reveals that this assignment may be more to do with the biases of the archaeologists than evidence based conclusions (Toms 1998). Only 13 out of 115 burials could be sexed, meaning that only approximately 11% of the deceased had a definite sex assigned and one of those 13 was a female skeleton that had been buried with weapons. If we extrapolate just from those numbers, it would suggest that 7% of the burials with weapons were female. Obviously in such a small sample size, the extrapolation is hardly sufficient to make sweeping statements about sex and how it translates into social roles, but it does serve to illustrate that even in the early stages of the Iron Age, there is a complexity beyond a simple binary.

Though textile tools and weapons/armour tend to be exclusionary of each other, other items were included with burials and so analysis was done to see if there was a specific “male” assemblage, i.e. items included with graves with weapons and/or a “female” assemblage, items

included with textile tools. The set of burial items had spinning equipment, and was often associated with interlocking rings, finely coiled springs, pins, beads, pendants and bronze studs.



Fig 13 - Vulci, Mandrone di Cavaluppo Necropolis 850-820 BC (second half of the IX century)

Taken from class lecture by Prof.ssa Angela Pola

Original at Museo Nazionale etrusco di Villa Giulia



Fig 14 - Bologna, Tomb from the Benacci necropolis. Early VIII century BC

Taken from class lecture by Prof.ssa Angela Pola

Original at Museo Nazionale etrusco di Villa Giulia

The set associated with weapons contained razors, knives, and possibly plates, though the razors were not exclusive.

Interestingly, anywhere between 40.5% and 47.5% of graves contained neither “male” nor “female” markers. Toms hypothesizes that though there are splits along gender lines with preferential associations, either some characteristic other than gender plays a significant role in the selection of grave goods or perishable items that were not preserved provided the missing link. In general, male-female burial goods patterns are upheld but are not exclusive and should not be taken as an immutable binary (Toms 1992).

A very similar analysis was undertaken by M.Carmen Vida Navarro examining burials from the early Iron Age from the Pontecagnano region in Campania, specifically the Picentino cemetery. Pontecagnano was called Picentia in antiquity. Already by the tenth century BCE this site was occupied and included both a settlement as well as a necropolis (Robb 2014). The location saw the influence of the Greeks, the urbanization of Etruscans and eventually saw the influx of celtic cultures in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE (Riva 2007). However, in the early Iron Age, it was people local to the area that were buried in the cemetery (Robb 2014). Unfortunately, neither the Vida Navarro publication nor the initial site report by Bruno d’Agostino are available digitally but the conclusions are mentioned by both Whitehouse in the article *Exploring Gender in Prehistoric Italy* and by Toms alongside her own result (d’Agostino 1974; Vida Navarro 1992). A summary of the conclusions is that out of 26 burials which could be sexed, twelve showed that the expected gender based burial assemblage matched the osteologically determined biological sex but that in 14 cases, the gender determination of the burial goods did not match the osteological evidence (Toms 1992, Whitehouse 2001). There

could potentially be some error in the osteological sex estimation due to the poor condition of the bones, however two were made on the basis of pelvic structure suggesting that the mismatches are not simply the result of methodological error and that the “weapons for males, spinning equipment for females” binary is simplistic and does not represent the full complexity of the situation (Whitehouse 2001). The implications of over half of the burials not conforming to the expected gender divide is staggering. The prevailing assumption in Italian archaeology is that the biological characteristics translate into socio-cultural gender roles (Brown 2024). If biology dictates our place in the world, and the manner in which we are buried is, at least in part, a reflection of that place, then the biological distinction between male and female should manifest as constant and readily identifiable characteristics in burials. However, if sex cannot be considered to be reliably determined by burial circumstances then “It is not the case that women only performed one kind of role which men would never do and vice versa” (Stratton 2016 p 866). However, if one needed to preserve the world view of a firm gender binary, these anomalies would have to be somehow addressed.

A more recent analysis of the skeletons at Pontecagnano attempted to determine if the amount of burial goods, and the associated social status, had an effect on overall health. While not strictly focused on the relationship between burial goods and gender, some of the conclusions can potentially be helpful to analyze the circumstances of this community. People buried with weapons showed inverse levels of association with trauma (Robb *et al* 2001). Given that martial activities, whether war or training, tend to result in more trauma rather than less, it suggests that the presence of weapons in burials in Pontecagnano is less related to a social role and more to social status.

3.5 The Tomb of the Canopic Jars

An example of how strongly parts of the scholarly community refuse to acknowledge this potential shift is The Tomb of the Canopic Jars in Macchiapiana which is currently displayed at the Museum of Sarteano. It was discovered in 1953 by Gugilelmo Maetzke and is one of the earliest examples of a chamber tomb replacing the “*ziro*” tomb (Minnetti 2007). *Ziro* is an Etruscan word for large, often terracotta tomb that was buried in the ground and covered with a large stone slab. They contained canopic urns with cremated remains. Many were made of ceramics but there are bronze examples and even a wooden one has been recovered. Some were found with traces of textiles and fibulae around them, likely the ornamentation of the urn itself. The change from *ziro* tombs to chamber tombs occurs at the beginning of the orientalizing period of Etruscan history and the Macchiapiana necropolis and surrounding area houses several finds with implications of gender roles in ancient Italy. There are five female burials here that are placed on a throne. While in comparison to the males, of whom there are 30, it is a significantly smaller percentage of about 16%, it is important to show that these women are placed here on symbols of power. The Etruscans likely adopted the iconography of the throne from the Levant and these symbols were transported over along with the chariot and the artistic style (Nijjober 2008). Thrones are known in both male and female graves but it is important to note that different types and placement of thrones have different meanings. Wooden thrones have been found in both male and female graves in Verucchio. The presence of a throne in a tomb was indicative of both family prestige but also appears to be connected to the deceased’s position within the religious community (Bentini *et al* 2018). By contrast when the deceased is actually placed resting on top of the throne, this is an indication of authority and power (Bentini *et al* 2018). Thrones as symbols of power rather than just high status are often paired with other

symbols including the axe (Nijober 2008). As another example, one of the tombs in the Cerveteri necropolis features a pair of people facing each other hewn into the rock. Both are sitting on thrones and have the dress of Etruscan aristocracy and in addition, one figure also has a *lituus* (priestly staff) and the other a scepter, both indicators of the upper echelons of political power (Bernard 2023). In another of the tombs of the Macchiana necropolis, Fonte all'Aia, contained an enthroned female with a shovel that was considered the ritual tool of a high ranking religious rank (Minetti 2007). While shovels can be part of a multipurpose tool kit, incense shovels play a role in the performance of cultic activities (Nagy 2016) and have been recovered as part of a votive deposit found in a sanctuary at Montecchio (Turfa 2014). Another important burial is the Tomb in the Vaiano area in the nearby Municipality of Castiglion del Lago. Not only is this a female canopic urn on a throne, she is buried with two bronze beaded-rim basins. These basins symbolize meat consumption which in itself is a symbol of control over food and typically only seen in male assemblages (Minetti 2007). For a woman to have the trappings of power over food distributions suggests that she wielded significant authority in life. Perhaps the most significant of the five is the Female Canopic Urn from the Tomb of Canopic jars in Sarteano. This small chamber tomb eventually becomes a family tomb when a male is added approximately 30 years later but initially, this was the burial place of a female in a canopic jar. She is depicted as a naturalistic head on a terracotta jar. She has facial features and silver hoop earrings and is placed on a throne made of limestone. Most importantly, she is believed to be holding a double headed axe. The symbology of axes can already be seen in the Neolithic era in Europe, Africa and the Middle East and in some Slavic languages the word for axe, *topor*, has roots all the way back to the Hatti sound “*tapar*” meaning to rule (Poruciuc 2016). In Italy, the axe can be seen in the symbology on vases, mirrors, coins, votive offerings and on cinerary urns and even on a grave

stele discovered near Vetulonia that depicts a warrior holding a double axe in his right hand (Springer, 1927). When compared to the rich tombs of Tarquinia or Vetulonia, the amount of grave goods in this tomb seems poor but when compared to the burials in the area, this deposition has a significantly higher number of grave goods indicating its comparative high status. The author states that the female is placed on a throne, in a central position, holding an axe, with the majority of the deposition grave goods assigned to her, “palese “supremazia” all’interno del contesto della deposizione femminile” (a clear "supremacy" of the female burial within the context) and then goes on to say that she is the chief’s wife or widow (Minetti 2007, p 109). A woman is quite literally standing on one symbol of power, holding another, is both physically and metaphorically elevated above the male and is still only called someone’s wife. If the terracotta figurine had been male, there would be absolutely no doubt that this was a chief.



Fig 15 - Female Canopic Urn from the Tomb of Sarteano in the Macchiapiana Necropolis, Sarteano, 630-620 BCE - Taken from class lecture by Prof.ssa Angela Pola, displayed at the Civic Archaeological Museum of Sarteano

There appears to be no interrogation of the assumption that women could not be chiefs despite all material evidence pointing to this woman being a chief. More recently there is speculation that the proto-portraiture of the cinerary urns in Northern Etruria may have a meaning associated with the way in which stratification emerged in the north as compared to with the south (Kennedy 2019). In the south stratification emerged through economic means by controlling the access to the trade routes but in the north, authority was seized through military means which gave rise to the ideal of the warrior prince and the proto-portraiture is a tool in establishing authority (Kennedy 2019). In effect, the features are not true to the person who is contained within the urn, they represent a specific social role at the top of the hierarchy. This is then reinforced through the physical elevation of the female cinerary urn over the male by placing it on the throne. By this reasoning, the person represented by the cinerary urn is both female and at the top of the hierarchy that places the warrior-prince as the ultimate authority. This would suggest that the identity of a warrior-prince and the identity of a woman are not necessarily exclusive but without further examples, it is difficult to hypothesise how and under what circumstances those identities intersect.

3.6 Veii, Tarquinia and Verucchio

A 2008 article *A Key to the Coffin: A model to assess social change in Villanovan tombs from Veii, Tarquinia and Verucchio (950 to 700 BC)* by J.F. Seubers illustrates the complications of thinking along a firm separation of mortuary contexts between male and female. This article presents an analysis of burial goods as related to status and gender on the basis of high-ranking burials at Veii, Tarquinia and Verucchio from 950 to 700 BCE. The determination of gender is made on the basis of grave goods rather than osteological evidence and the author uses the

gender assignments of items based on overall scholarship. Almost immediately, issues crop up. Early on in the article the hut-urn is described as a symbol of male head of the household as well as a warrior. The article then states that there are five hut-urns found at Tarquinia and while all five contain goods that are typically assigned to males, some of them also include female items. We also know that some hut-urns contain female remains (Bartolini 2002). An example is a hut urn from Castel Gandolfo, Montecucco area, dated to 900-850 BCE and currently housed in the Vatican museum. At Veii, female burials contain little weaving equipment but significant numbers contain both axes and knives (Seubers 2008). While knives can potentially be seen as ambiguous in function, axes as prestige items are very much linked to power and authority as described above (Poruciu 2016). Tarquinia presents a similar situation, out of five high ranking female tombs, two contain bronze axes. At Verucchio, ten male burials also contained axes. Seubers presents axes in an interesting manner. Though he initially describes them as related to the preparation of food, he then goes on and states that “An axe is also found in female tomb I17 (Veii IIA) and EF11-12 (Veii IIB), making the first appearance of weapons in this selection an almost exclusively female occasion” and admits that at Verucchio there is evidence that axes may be part of a warrior’s *corredo* (Seubers 2008 p. 4-5). It could be suggested that there are regional differences and that bronze axes are only considered part of a male repertoire, but in that case there is still the issue of tomb Lippi 47 which contained the most luxurious female goods, but contained very little weaving equipment and an axe. To confuse matters further, tombs determined to be male by virtue of a warrior *corredo* also occasionally contain spindle whorls, the provenance of women. Axes are described as both a food preparation item and a weapon but Seubers does not draw any conclusions about female burials with weapons. The spindle whorls in male burials are dismissed as either a gift from a woman or as having decorative value. Even

though expected gender burial norms are breached in both male and female deposits, there is no interrogation of the established norms. It is perhaps also telling that the article contains no figures of any of the female graves.

Finally, there is the case of tomb FBHS (Fossa with a Bull-Headed Staff) where, as the name suggests, a staff with bronze adornments is found along with jewelry. The gender determination cannot be made due to a lack of objects that would typically signify either male or female; however Seubers mentions that staves are usually male markers (Seubers 2008). It is worth noting that even in the past, people had an understanding that those outside the binary exist. The term transgender is a modern construct and must be applied with care but the notion of being of one gender and transforming to another is a theme that has expression in ancient writing with the most prominent western example being Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, not to mention numerous variations of the myth of Hermaphroditus (Power 2020). The Etruscans did not leave us with textual sources but an analysis of iconography of how people are depicted shows awareness that variations exist in multiple categories (Sandhoff 2011).

Interpretations range from a symbolic transition from boy/girlhood to man/womanhood, or that hermaphroditic figure is a symbol of apotropaic power in the Mediterranean region (Miller 2015). While the discussion on iconography is beyond the scope of this thesis, the important point here is that gender was not necessarily considered a fixed and rigid characteristic.

3.7 Samnium Burials

The archaeology of Italy is made up of more than just the Etruscans. The pre-Roman Samnium territory consisted of a plateau in southern Italy between the river Sangro and the river Ofanto, and the plain of Campania and the plain of Apulia. The mountains inhibited contact with

others but not so much that they were unknown to their neighbours including the Romans who latinized their local name of *Safineis* into Samnites (Salmon 1967). Roman writers speak of a people proficient in warfare and enthusiastic in their opposition to Rome but it is worthwhile remembering that these writings came not only from outsiders but also centuries after the events (Scopacasa 2014).



Fig 16 - Ancient Samnium (Richardson 2009 p. 129)

The literature displays the same belief as that of Etruscan scholars, that weapons must be an exclusively male burial item while personal ornamentation is a female trait and this belief is prevalent even when skeletal data is not available for confirmation (Scopacasa 2014). To test this theory, Scopacasa analyzed 194 burials in ten sites. The data was then organized according to a chronological timeline and grouped into three categories depending on how much information was able to be obtained from the osteological record. Sex, age and social status were all considered during analysis, but due to the condition of the skeletons, neither sex nor age were able to be determined for all burials. The following refers to skeletons where sexing estimation is

available. The burials mostly consisted of supine inhumations arranged in clusters that probably represent kinship groups. The resulting data not only provides an insight into burial assemblages, but dental and osteological data have indicators of diet and lifestyle.

In the 6th century, burials with weapons were very rare and conclusions are difficult to draw due to missing data, some as a result of lack of prior publishing and some because of the conditions of the bodies but in this period there is no significant dissociation between personal ornamentation and weapon burials. Rather, segregation happens at the level of social status. Only those who were considered in the upper echelons of society included weapons and personal ornamentation amongst their grave goods though it is not clear if the burials that contain both weapons and personal ornamentation all belong to men or if some belong to women. However, skeletal markers from this period indicate that the activities undertaken by the individuals do not vary by sex; both males and females have similar patterns of wear and injury, including teeth which indicates the same lifestyles and diet.

In the late 6th to early 5th centuries, weapons continued to be scarce in most of the sites, with the exception of Fossa. What is relevant for our purposes is that at Campo Consolino, while only four out of 65 males are buried with weapons, there is a burial that is classified as female that contains a spear. In addition, personal ornaments were mostly found with females, however 12 out of the 65 males also had them. In terms of gender signalling, positions of fibula in different parts of the body for males and females suggest that clothing was likely a strong gender marker since different styles of clothing needed to be fastened in different locations. In addition, shapes are mostly gender specific but not always, two of the rod-arch fibula that are predominantly found in male graves are also present in two female burials though amber appears to be exclusive to females and is most commonly found in high status graves. Iron knives are

strongly associated with male burials in most sites though the author notes that knives can be both a potential weapon but also a household tool and therefore are often of an ambiguous function. And in contrast, at Campo Consolino nearly half of the knives found were found buried with females.



Fig 17 - Sample of weapons found at Campo Consolino - (Acconcia and Ferreri 2020 p. 322)

In the Late 5th to the 3rd century at the site of Morgia della Chiusa there is a higher overall frequency of burials in comparison to other periods. Fibulae styles no longer show sex preferences but conversely there is a stronger emerging connection between weapons and the male identity; three out of nine males are buried with weapons. This connection is not necessarily exclusive as the burials of two unsexed adults as well as one of the three subadults are also buried with weapons. Both males and females show high levels of enthesitis, a painful

inflammation, and an indicator of heavy manual labour such as farming and/or building. Males exhibit higher instances at 85% but female rates are also high at 67%, again indicating a similarity in lifestyles and activities. Overall, though patterns certainly occur, there is no support for the strict separation of the male warrior and female homemaker (Scopacasa 2014).

3.8 Summary

The concept of gender differences clearly exists in the Etruscan world but how that concept was structured cannot be assumed to be the same as it is for us today. Mainstream Italian archaeology tends to present women, especially Etruscan women through the historical lens of active male, passive female and women tend to be defined not on their own merits but through their relationships to the males in their lives (Shipley 2017). The above survey of the literature available for only some of the sites reveal ongoing deviations. In the Tomb of Suspended Aryballos, a high ranking female is buried with a spear. An analysis of Villanovian burials from 900 - 720 BCE shows that a vast majority of burials were not sexed and of those that had been, there is at least one instance of a female buried with weapons. A more recent analysis of Villanovan tombs from Veii, Tarquinia and Verucchio between 950 - 700 BCE an examination of grave goods shows that in each location, there are burials that defy the strict gender separation in various ways even without osteological information, including multiple instances of women being buried with axes, a weapon. A study in Pontecagano shows instances of mismatch between burial goods and osteology. The Tomb of the Canopic Jars in Macchiapiana and surrounding areas provides information of women on thrones and one holding an axe, a clear sign of authority of the highest level. In an analysis of Samnite burials we see mixed male and female goods in

burials of a single body, a female buried with a spear and osteological evidence of similar lifestyles and diets. So does that mean that we should throw away everything we know about gender roles in Italy? Of course not, clear patterns exist and provide information about the societies that they relate to. What is also clear, is that a simplistic view that women did this, and men did that does not provide the whole story. In the next chapter I will examine burials in other geographical regions that proved to break the expectations of gender roles and how scholarship reacted there to see what lessons may be learned and applied to Italian archaeology to ensure the best possible practices are put in place.

4.0 Chapter 3

4.1 Anatolia

The presence of female burials is not limited to the Iron Age. For example, in the Anatolian Early Bronze Age (ca 3000-2000 BCE) there are sites where nearly 50 % of women were buried with weapons but have been largely ignored by scholarship (Selover 2020).



Fig 18 - Locations where female bodies with weapons were located in Anatolia during EBA (Selover 2021)

These bodies showed evidence of traumatic injuries on both males and females, some healed, some fatal. Both male and female adults had weapons in burials though it was more prevalent in male graves. The age distinction is important because it speaks to the potential symbolism of the weapon. If grave goods are buried with people who were unlikely to be able to perform in that role, then the item is more likely to be a social or hereditary marker rather than something that

speaks to what function that person performed in life. While it may be possible that a child begins training with weapons early in life, they are unlikely to be considered as fulfilling a fighting role until they are older [cite]. For example, to return for a moment to Italy, Grave HH119 in Quattro Fontanili at *Veii* included the burial of a child approximately seven to eight years old with a sword and another child tomb, EEFF4, was found with a razor and three spearheads; since a child neither shaves nor would be likely to be a warrior, there may be symbology other than a specific role (Toms 1998). In addition, the trend of weapons exists among both non-elite and elite burials. If weapons were exclusively found in high-ranking burials, an argument exists that they are a status symbol rather than a functional implement of war. Finally, there was no difference in functional markers of weapons (wear, material, etc) though there appears to be a differentiation on the types of weapons along sex lines. The weapons that were present with both sexes, such as daggers, were both placed on the hip suggesting the same or at least similar patterns of meaning. In essence if a serviceable dagger in a specific portion of the body is interpreted as a weapon, it stands to reason that this would hold true for both males and females. To apply a different standard for men and women where the material context is the same makes no sense. By the same token, many weapons were broken - symbolically killed - in both male and female burials, again suggesting that the same meaning was assigned (Selover 2020).

We must turn to differences in order to potentially contextualize the finds. The weapons buried with women in Anatolia were daggers and spears, personal weapons that did not require a great deal of training and meant more as a line of defense rather than attack while the male burials contained a larger breadth of weapons types. In such a situation, one possible interpretation is that while men were more likely to employ weapons in the context of

aggression, women were the defenders (Selover 2020). Both men and women were engaged in warfare, but in very differing contexts. This does not negate the fact that women were still combatants but highlights how being able to contextualize the finds without imposing bias can provide nuance and show complexity.

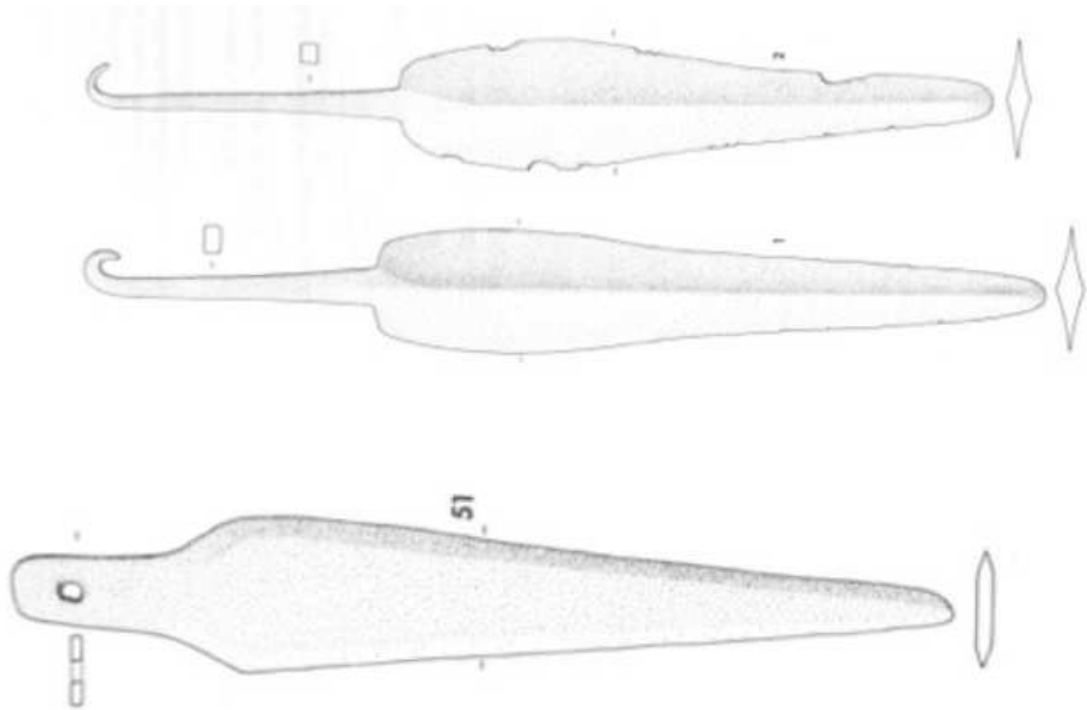


Fig 19 - Examples of bronze spearhead from İkitzepe (Selover 2015 p. 204-205)

4.2 Eurasian steppe

The Eurasian steppe is a massive swath of land reaching from the western portions of Russia to the Chinese border. It is better suited to pastoralism than to agriculture but the open, largely flat geography is highly conducive to horsemanship and a multitude of cultures existed here including the Scythians and the Sarmatians. The Scythians left one of the more significant impacts (Rice 1957) but the Sarmatians, who rose to prominence in the Scythian collapse, left

behind their own mark. Both were Indo-European language speakers with common ancestors and very similar cultures.

The Scythian core territory was around the Black Sea and Caspian steppes region though their military conquests often took them beyond these borders. They invented the recurve bow and used it to make war in Asia Minor, Assyria, Syria on both the open battlefield (Cynarski and Maciejewska 2016) and in guerilla warfare style like when they harassed Darius on his excursion across Thracia on the way to Greece and though they were unable to stop his advance, they reportedly significantly vexed his forces (Rice 1957). Their name for themselves was “Skolts” meaning archers and they buried their dead in mounds called kurgans (Cynarski and Maciejewska 2016). Monumentality in burial was important for the steppe people as it was their connection to the land and their representation of belonging; the Iron Age showed an increased expression of these structures (Hanks 2008). The Scythian decline occurred between the fourth and the second centuries BCE where the void was filled by the Sarmatians (Cynarski and Maciejewska 2016).

The Sarmatians shared genetic roots with Scythians and rose to prominence around the Danube in the Podkarpacie region around the third century BCE. Their primary contribution to martial endeavors is the heavy cavalry and some warriors even made it as far as Britain, as attested to by the genetic testing of R1a1 haplogroup. They eventually mixed with their neighbours where their genetic profile is still detectable among the Slavs (Cynarski and Maciejewska 2016). The stories of the Amazons from classic writers are most likely based on either the Scythians or the Samaritans or potentially both as some, like Herodotus, did not differentiate between the different groups of Eurasian nomads (Rice 1957). Because of the similarities in cultures and geographical regions, many studies on possible female warriors tend

to include examples from both cultures. For this reason, I will also be examining these burials in the same section.



Fig 20 - A hippie rider seizes a mounted Amazonian warrior by her Phrygian cap, Roman mosaic from Daphne second half of the 4th century AD, now in the Louvre, Paris - credit Jacques MOSSOT from wikicommons https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Orient_m%C3%A9diterran%C3%A9en_de_l'Empire_romain_-_Mosa%C3%AFque_byzantine_-5.JPG

Some of the challenges that face this region are similar to those that face the Etruscan and other pre-Roman cultures of Italy. There are no written texts left behind by the people themselves, only accounts from others, some of whom are the same sources that write about the Italic preroman peoples with the same prejudices and biases and often highly mythologized accounts (Linduff and Rubinson 2008). In addition, while there is some settlement information, it's mostly mortuary culture that is being used to make interpretations with all of its limitations.

And lastly, incomplete or deficient publications make a confident interpretation difficult. For example, a first century A.D. burial from Tillya Tepe, modern day Afghanistan of five females and one male was documented by the excavator Victor Sarianidini. It is an interesting case, because there is potential that three of the females were buried with weapons; one with a dagger, one with a knife (though the ambiguity of the term knife has already been discussed), and one with two daggers and a battle-axe. One of the publications states that the female was buried with a dagger and then goes on to say that there were “absolutely no weapons of any kind” and in a publication written by the same author only four years later, the battle-axe becomes a pickaxe and the two daggers are now listed as iron fragments (Rubinson 2008). Such inconsistencies lead to interpretations that do not match the material evidence.

On the other hand, there are some studies with very clear and logical methodology with coherent interpretations. A 2022 article *Female Burials with Weapons in the Early Nomadic Kurgans* by N.A. Berseneva lays out very clear criteria of the qualification that a burial must have in order to qualify to be considered as a female burial with weapons: there must be an osteological evaluation that the body was female, the grave goods must clearly be associated with that body, an undisturbed burial or at least burials with undisturbed sections, and the weapons must be laying *in-situ*. She analyzes all burials from multiple sites in the Southern Urals dated to between the late fifth to the second centuries BCE - Lebedevka, Pokrovka, Mechetsay, Shumaevsky, Prokhorovka, Kichigino, Imangulovo, Yakovlevka, and Filippovka. Out of the 195 burials which were identified as female, 24 had weapons meaning approx 12.3% of adult females were buried with weapons. The weapons were placed in female graves in the same arrangements as in the male graves and were battle ready weapons, not ritual or symbolic. The vast majority

were quivers and arrowheads with a few daggers, but a sword and two spears appear in separate burials, and in at least some graves, the remains of a bow has been found. Since most bows are made of perishable materials, the lack of them cannot be assumed to mean the same as none having been placed. 21 out of the 24 female burials with weapons also included ornaments and spindle whorls. The inclusion of both weapons and weaving equipment suggests that these activities were not only not segregated by sex but that one person could practice both. Expanding the area of analysis to the entire Lower Volga region, 9% of female burials contain weapons (Berseneva 2022). These weapons are found in burials of all social levels and are not restricted to a specific strata. In the previous Sauromatian period, the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE, in the same area, 20% of the warrior graves were female (Jordan 2009).

The Pokrovka region near the Kazakhstan border in particular has been the subject of some discourse. Five Iron Age cemeteries consisting of 50 kurgans and 150 female burials were examined and female burials were initially separated into three categories, hearth-women, priestesses, and warriors based on the grave goods that they were buried with, however, a fourth category of warrior-priestess had to be added after both ritual items and weapons were found to be combined in some graves though knives were excluded since nearly everyone was buried with at least one (Davis-Kimball 1997). The breakdown was Hearth women - 75%, priestesses - 7%, warriors - 15% and warrior-priestesses - 3%. However, some methodological issues were raised and other authors advised caution on accepting the results at face value but admitted that there is at least a basis of findings that merits a further study (Hanks 2008 and Rubinson 2008). Some of the issues included some of the choices of goods that were classified as cultic such as mirrors or dyes that might have had other applications. Another concern was the burial of a young person

who was classified as female and the age given as 13-14. Sex in pre-adult populations can be tricky to establish depending on if certain puberty thresholds have occurred or not. In addition, the question then becomes if perhaps these items are not the mark of a role but of social status since this cusp of age could potentially be seen as entry into adulthood but is also young enough that this might be a marker of hereditary prestige. However, since often in tribal societies, children begin training for martial endeavors at a very young age so it is certainly not outside the realm of possibility (Hanks 2008).

4.3 Eastern Europe

In Southern Ukraine, most of the kurgans containing female warrior burials have been discovered post WWII and include Scythian, Sauromatian, Sarmatian, Sargat, Saka cultures as well as others belonging to circa the fourth century BCE. The female burials contain the expected spindles, jewelry, and mirrors but also bows and arrows, iron knives, armor and lances (Jones-Bley 2008). For example in Volnaya, kurgan 22 held a female with a sword. Another burial, Akkermen I kurgan 16, contained a female with armor, weapons (arrows, quiver, lance among others) jewelry, and spindle whorl and additional graves across the Caucasus have produced a wide range of weapons such as daggers, lances, spears, swords and bows and arrows. One of the most interesting is a Cholodny Yar burial, kurgan 20. The kurgan itself was in the center of a ditch that was over 4m (14 ft) in diameter and had a ceiling made of timber (Rolle 1989). The osteologically identified female is the undeniable center focus of the burial, with rich grave goods placed near her head and torso and with a second male skeleton laying perpendicular at her feet. She was buried with jewelry of precious metals and stones, ceramics,

food offerings, a mirror, spindle whorls, lance points, arrowheads, and pebble missiles while the male was associated with only five grave goods in total, all ornamental in nature (Rolle 1989 and Jones-Bley 2008).



Fig 21 - Drawing of the burial layout of kurgan 20 in Cholodny Yar (Rolle 1989 p. 88)

There have been challenges to these findings with suggestions that the weapons are merely gifts from a grieving husband, but further osteological analysis shows that the skeletons showed evidence of wounds sustained in battle (Rolle 1989). The assumption of gifts demonstrates another facet of bias. There is no examination of the belief that weapons are an exclusively male providence, there is only a reframing of the situation in a way to ensure the connection between

the item and the gender. This is mirrored by the earlier mentioned assumption that spindle whorls in male graves must be gifts from women (see ch 3.6).

Bows and arrows were by far the most common type of weapon located with female burials, likely because it didn't require the same levels of upper body strength or because it could be used from horseback (Jones-Bley 2008). Both of these reasons are reasonable and efficient adaptations for a wide open plain where a substantial portion of fighters fight from horseback and are female.

At some point in the late 3rd century, the culture of La Tène, a celtic group of Iron Age Europe was assimilated by local indigenous peoples in Poland and the adaptation produced the Przeworsk culture. The specific material adaptations included ceramic work as well as metallurgy of iron as evidenced by the emergence of new centers of metal working and also the adoption of cremation as a burial style as well as the ritual breaking of weapons in burial contexts. During the Roman period there is strong evidence of the Przeworsk culture engaged in trade and the roman style gladius became a common grave good. Migrations and the Hun invasion of the fifth century CE signalled the end of the material Przeworsk culture (Andrzejowski 2001, 2010). During the early Roman Period, in the first two centuries of the first millennium CE, over 60 graves of female skeletons with military equipment were found in the Mazowsze region (Bochnak 2020). In ten of these the items were limited to spurs and since equestrian equipment can sometimes be a prestige item rather than a warrior item and therefore cannot be unequivocally considered to be indicative of warrior status. However, the remainder contained swords, shields and pikes. The swords were both single and double edged and all weapons were those best suited to melee combat (Bochnak 2020). They were also bent and destroyed,

commonly interpreted as symbolically dying like their owner such as can be seen in figure 21. Despite the fact that these women were buried with all the characteristics of a warrior burial, the author of the analysis refuses to accept the possibility of them as having warrior status, “even though women of the Przeworsk culture may have occasionally participated in armed combat, there is little evidence that they may be called warrior-women” (Bochnak 2020 p. 11). In his view, simply owning weapons and using them in battle does not meet the definition of warrior-hood. Bochnak spends a significant amount of time on classical writers such as Tacitus, Cassius dio. Plutarch, and Herodotus among others and what their portrayal of a female warrior is and because the Przeworsk culture did not leave behind written records (they did not leave behind any writings) that confirmed that these were warrior women, he believes that material culture alone is insufficient to prove their existence (Bochnak 2020). It is unclear if the author believes that the males who were buried in a similar fashion are considered warriors or not. If not, then perhaps there is something to be said for how we define a warrior. But if there is no questioning of the male marital status, then one has to wonder why women have to possess additional characteristics to be considered the same as men.

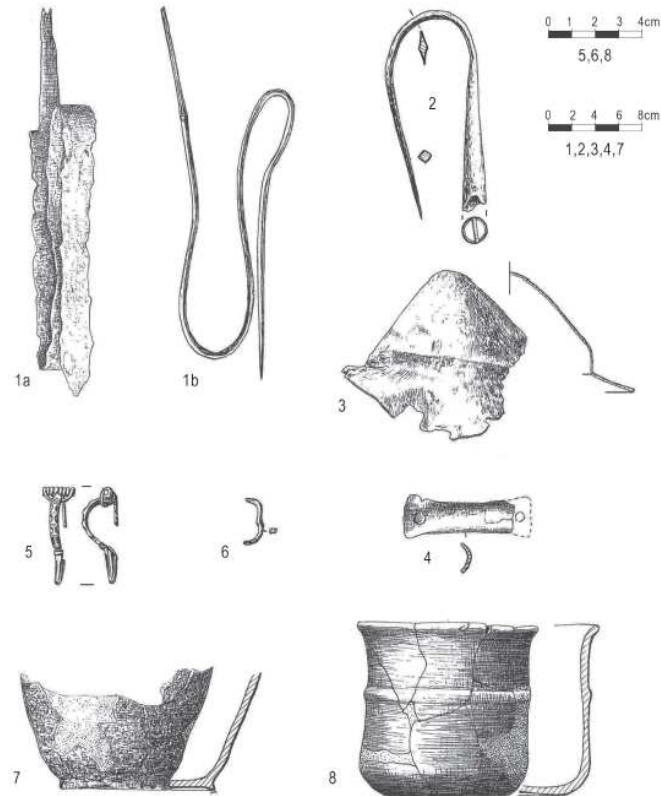


Fig 21 - Goods associated to grave 41c (Bochnak 2020 p. 9)

4.4 Sweden - The Birka Burial

The Birka case study deserves some special attention because in a rare set of events, it provides a micro level example that is symbolic of the general issue. A presumed male grave was analyzed and it was revealed that the male warrior was in fact biologically female. It is worthwhile to consider the events in chronological order. Birka is a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) site dating back to the Viking middle ages of 900-1100 CE. This period was considered the transition between preliterate to literate society, and in a very simplified overview, the transition from Paganism to Christianity, along with a consolidation and centralization of power and increasing urbanization (Kjellström 2016).

Just a few years prior to the discovery, a paper was written that provided an overview of the issue of *Warrior-women in Viking Age Scandinavia* (Gardela 2013). In it, the author stated that gender archaeology has begun to make inroads into viking archaeology and expand from the focus on the male warrior stereotype. Interest in female roles began in the 1980s and challenged the view of the passive woman but instead considered woman the trader, woman the ritual specialist and woman the political leader. The mortuary practices were very diverse, not only between settlements but even within settlements types included inhumations and cremations, chambers, boats, etc but one of the issues is that even though much of the mortuary evidence was excavated in the 20th century, sex/gender was assigned on the basis of grave goods rather than osteological analysis. Gardela then conducts a survey of female graves with weapons, and in general speaks in terms of possibilities while addressing the ambiguities inherent in interpreting grave goods. Interestingly, he does mention another Birka grave - a double burial with a male and a female and suggests that even though conventionally any weapons found in a double grave should be assigned to the male, the placement may justify assigning them to the female. He then switches to a discussion of the iconography of warrior-women including women holding spears and swords on tapestries as well as brooches representing the famous valkyries and adds that there are numerous textual sources that portray various female warriors in different contexts. He concludes that women warriors present an intriguing concept that requires further study and especially the proper sex estimation of older burials to see if any of those who were simply labeled male on the basis of grave goods are in fact female. Although he states that he is not yet prepared to argue that warrior-women in the Viking Age have been archaeologically confirmed, he adds that “Given the nature of archaeological data and how often it tends to surprise us, this view may be subject to change, perhaps even sooner than we would suspect.” (Gardela 2013 p.

307). In fact, it only took three years for this to occur, and it did so with a very consequential case.

In 2016, Kjellström published an article called *People in transition: Life in the Mälaren Valley from an Osteological Perspective*, which were the results of a project funded by the Swedish Research Council to investigate how these transitions manifested in the osteological evidence. 236 of the over 1100 burials from Birka were analyzed and the author acknowledged methodological issues with incorrect skeleton labeling, mentioning as an example Bj581 which was listed in the excavation report as male but three separate examinations all pronounced them to be female (Kjellström 2016). The determination was made on the basis of two characteristics of the pelvis - a broad greater sciatic notch and a wide preauricular sulcus - as well as a mandible that showed no mental eminence projection, and an overall gracile bone structure and mention was made that there was no conflict related trauma on the skeleton which matched the rest of the collection; even in male burials only 2 out of 49 had evidence of sharp force trauma (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al 2017). For what was about to be a monumental discovery, that mention is very limited. This discrepancy prompted a follow up using aDNA (ancient DNA). A team of ten specialists formed an interdisciplinary team to consider the issue. The subsequent article mentions that there was an osteological analysis done in the 1970s but rejected because the skeleton was not considered to be connected to the grave confidently, which they did (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al 2017). That report did not produce any academic paper that I was able to locate, likely given the lack of attribution but I believe it's likely a report that was included with the collection. Two samples were taken, one from the left humerus and one from a tooth and the chromosome analysis showed the determination of XX which is assigned to females. The confirmation provoked discourse in both academic and popular circles, 130 news agencies

around the world ran the story and the article was the 43rd most accessed out of 2.2 million of its year (Price et al 2019). This prompted the authors to write another article, focusing less on the methodology and technical aspects, and more on the implications of this discovery.

Viking stereotypes have long been plumbed for both popular entertainment and product branding and as a result, certain stereotypes have been built into the collective consciousness (Price et al 2019). Burial Bj581 certainly played into those stereotypes. Originally excavated in 1889, a wooden chamber inside a dug out pit which two horses with equestrian equipment, a skeleton that was deemed to be in good condition, and in addition to a multitude of weapons, a gaming board and pieces were located in what was probably a bag placed on the deceased's lap (Price et al 2019). The weapons included a sword, axe, fighting knife, two lances, two shields and 25 armour-piercing arrows. The remnants of the textiles in the tomb were analyzed and the conclusion, which was reached prior to the sex estimation, was that this person commanded cavalry troops and reported directly to a royal war-leader (Price et al 2019). This was supported by the idea that a complete gaming set has been seen in burial goods as symbolic of a military strategist role (Jordan 2009) and the fact that there are no items that would imply any other role. All in all, it was described as “Perhaps the most remarkable of all the graves in this field” (Stolpe 1879, p.2)

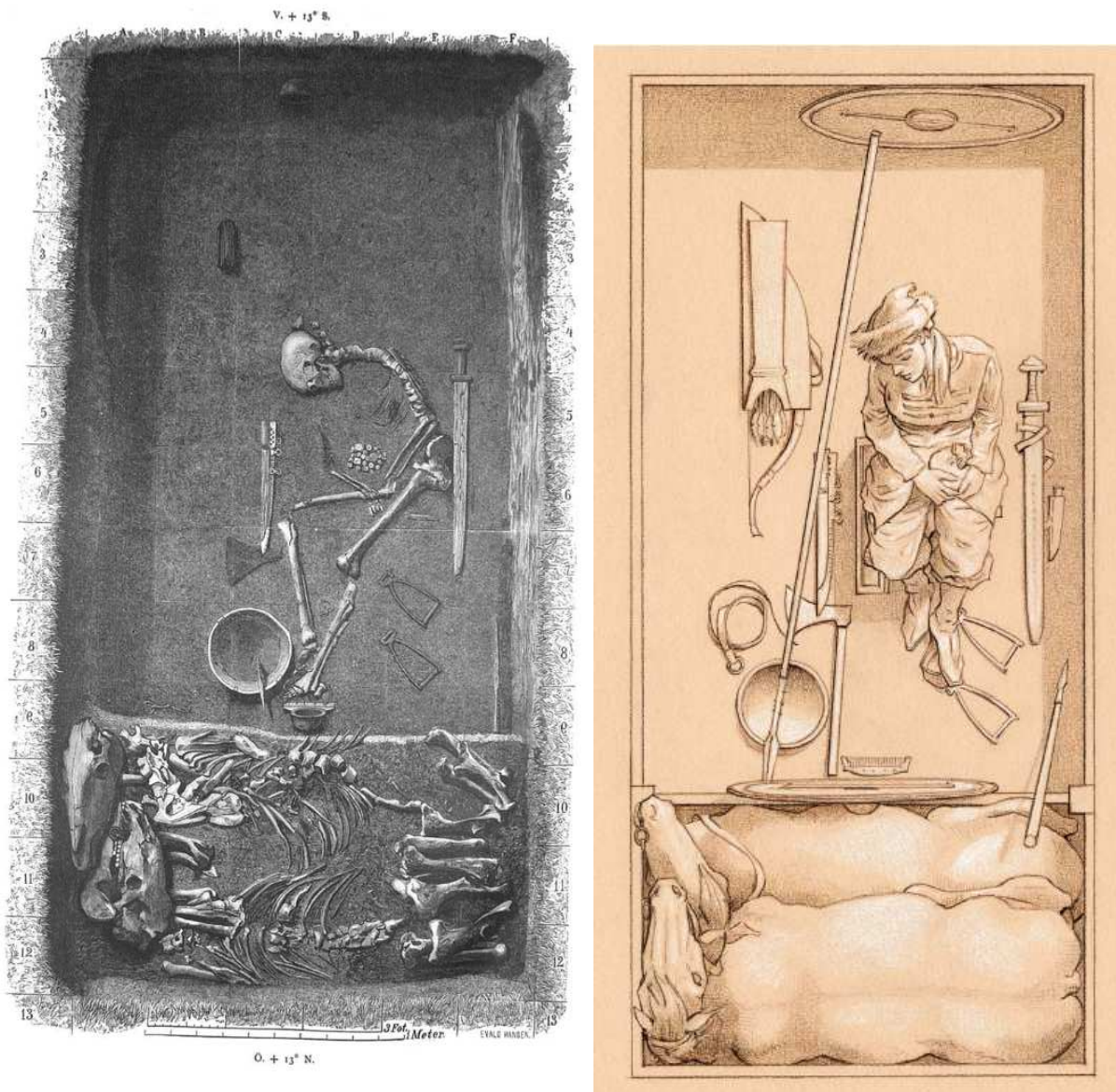


Fig 22 - Illustration by Evald Hansen based on the original plan of grave Bj 581 by excavator (Hjalmar Stolpe 1889) (left) and a reconstruction drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson of the burial as it might have initially looked (right) (Sayeret *al.* 2019)

Ongoing research consistently interpreted the burial as a high-status warrior, and here the article lists eleven publications ranging from 1967 to 2016, and no articles were located that disagreed with this assessment (Price et al 2019). Physically the burial was located in a location outside the

gate to the fort and near a building that was interpreted as garrison building, at least in part due to the high numbers of weapons stored there and in short, “The person in Bj.581 was buried in a grave full of functional weapons and war-gear (and little else), in close proximity to other burials with weapons, next to a building saturated with weapons, outside the gate of a fortress” (Price et al 2019, p.192). The conclusion was that based on the totality of the evidence, this was a high-ranking female military leader, however caution was raised against making generalizations about the whole of Viking Age culture. A single anomaly is not enough to make sweeping declarations but it is enough to start asking additional questions which is why these anomalies should be included in the published material; so that others may use them to further the research.

The responses to this research have been plentiful and varied. Some scholars accept the results and consider what this means in terms of what we know about not only Viking Age culture but the status of women in a broader sense. For example, *A context for the Birka grave Bj581? Women and military leadership in the tenth century* considers the world at large and how women were seen in it, examining historical examples of women in leadership roles and how they were viewed by their contemporaries. It suggests that while unusual, it’s not a unique circumstance and that there are other examples.

Some accept the results and use this instance to consider the biases that are present in the field of Archaeology. For example, *Twenty-first century bioarchaeology: Taking stock and moving forward* is a paper presenting the discussions that took place at a workshop hosted by Arizona State University and includes the Birka case as a reminder that “One might wonder why the presence of powerful women in the past is newsworthy, but such androcentric extensions of today's world into the past persist” (Buikstra et al 2022, p. 62).

There are those who do not challenge the reading of the deceased as a biological female but suggest that this might be a clear example of a transgender person in the past. The article *Beating a Dead Horse... Or Two: Bj* by E. Simms present this burial as someone whose biological sex and their gender expression do not match. The author does not challenge the notion that warriors are males, but rather sees this as confirmation that transgender people have existed in antiquity (Simms 2019). This is a valid field of inquiry though there is caution needed to ensure that we are not imposing modern conceptualization of gender identity on people in antiquity. It does, however, suggest that there are implications about how gender was viewed by Viking culture and whether it was as intrinsically tied to the biological sex of a person as some researchers assumed it was. There are textual references to people outside the gender binary in both ancient Greece and ancient Rome so clearly people had knowledge of such circumstances in antiquity though the way they conceptualized them might be different from our own (Miller 2015).

There are also a number of responses that reject the conclusions of the authors, generally for one of two reasons. The first one rejects them on the basis of poor methodology. For example, in *Female Viking Revisited*, Fedir Androshchuk states that the original methodology was so poorly done that it's impossible to confirm if the bones tested are actually attributable to this grave (Androshchuk 2018). The second posits that if the skeleton is a woman, then the grave cannot be a warrior's grave. Rune Edberg, in his article *Some comments on the interpretation of Birka grave Bj 581* suggests that the grave was never actually a warrior's grave; the weapons are only symbolic and he posits a hypothesis that this might in fact be a trader's grave (Edberg 2019).

5.0 Discussion/Conclusions

Feminist archaeology inherently sought to change the academic landscape. Privilege has been defined as an additional advantage but it can also be defined as the absence of obstacles. Those who do not experience the obstacles, have significantly less motivation to acknowledge and combat them. The very first part of Newton's first law of motion is that an object at rest will remain at rest unless an outside force acts upon it. For some, the outside force must first make them aware of how and why this privilege exists and its roots in humanism (Crellin 2024). Initially the humanists were merely those who studied the humanities, but gradually the definition expanded to include the drive to improve humans (Copson 2015). Humanism as a principle was broadly defined in the 19th century as an ideal that placed human reason as inherently valuable and capable in opposition to the primarily Christian dogma of a sinful human nature, though in the 20th century that opposition has been downplayed (Copson 2015). The capabilities of human reason were one of the foundations of the Renaissance (McClinton 2006) from which antiquarianism and then archaeology grew out of and therefore humanism is deeply intertwined in archaeological practices although there have been post-humanist challenges (De Liaño and Fernández-Götz 2021). Humanism relies on the concept of "universal and neutral human figure – *an Everyman*" but the everyman possesses very precise qualities; he is straight, white, cis, able, western, educated and male (Crellin 2024 p. 47). Archaeology started out as a place where straight, white, well-off men had their voices privileged and to some of them, equality looked like oppression because they now had to share that space and were being forced to acknowledge that their experiences and knowledge were not the only ones considered valuable. This is an ongoing situation and there are many publications that demonstrate how gender and feminist archaeology is still being sidelined and marginalized and that the discipline

remains largely androcentric (Shiple 2016; Selover 2021; Gennaro 2016). Academia is part of the world at large and the gender binary that has been integrated into our society, naturally finds expression here as well, especially since interpretation is such a large part of what archaeology does. We are not dealing with rigid and orderly mathematical phenomena where two plus two always equals five but with individuals who had their own thoughts, ideas, motivations, some of which align with the greater patterns and some will run counter much like in societies today. Too often it seems like when archaeology talks about a culture, it is seen as a static and monolithic set of concepts. Determining and exploring patterns allows us to say something about the past but there is no universal law of any culture. In addition, we are not dealing with complete and pristine sets of data. Not only does each new site have the potential to add new context to an existing *corpus* of knowledge, so new technologies, and new frameworks can tease out new information from older sites and artefacts. Good science is to follow the evidence where it leads, which requires curiosity and certainty is the death of curiosity.

Curiosity means that when an anomalous site or artefact is located, it is not ignored but considered. The Tomb of Suspended Aryballos produced a rich female burial with a distinctly male item: the spear. The response of the field should not be to ignore it because it doesn't match the current known data, but rather to consider the implications. Firstly, is it really so anomalous? We see that exceptions to the weapons equals male burial exist in Pontecagnano, Macchiapiana, Verucchio, *Veii*, Tarquinia, from *Samnium* and outside of Italy, in Eurasia, in the Balkans, and as far north as Sweden. Clearly, this should not be held onto as a firm boundary but tested each time. Does that mean that there are no patterns? Of course not, each of these sites also shows that in the majority of cases, weapons do mean a male burial. The next thought then is, what do the weapons mean? And this begets a related question of what can be considered a weapon. How do

we define knives vs daggers and how can we know if the axes that the women of Etruria were frequently buried with are weapons of war or tools? If we are able to increase precision and uniformity in grave goods description so that the function of these items can be better understood, and we are able to answer such questions will enhance methodology and make our interpretations that much more secure. And if they are weapons, does that suggest that the people buried with them are warriors or could there be other, more symbolic functions to these items. Is it perhaps an indication of the ideal of a warrior than the functional role? Does the answer remain the same throughout the whole period that is being studied? One of the ways that this can be done is by examining the way that the genders are displayed iconographically in the same culture but at different points in time. While this is a very rich topic, a simplified illustration can be the shifting representation of how women are positioned on Etruscan sarcophagi. From the 6th century forward, depicting a couple on the lids of a sarcophagus was standard practice (Bonfante 2004). One of the most famous examples is the Sarcophagus of the Spouses from the second half of the sixth century, also known as the Sarcophagus of the Bride and Groom. The male and female are depicted lying together on a *kline*, a banqueting couch echoing the description of Theopompus. There is a clear feeling of intimacy and connection. Sarcophagi depictions are also reinforced by painted banquet scenes in Etruscan tombs such as Tomb of the Painted Vases or the Tomb of Hunting and Fishing where couples are seen drinking together. Beyond mere iconography, it has been suggested that this speaks to the presence of women at symposia. To the Greeks and Romans of the same period, this was considered shameful behaviour (Corner 2012; Aristodemou 2011).



Fig 23 - Sarcophagus of the Spouses from Caere, now in the National Etruscan Museum at Villa Giulia in Rome - picture by Sailko from wikicommons

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sarcophagus_of_the_Spouses_from_Villa_Giulia_in_Rome.jpg

By the fourth century BCE, the more common way to portray a husband and wife is by depicting the male reclining, but the wife is seated near the foot of the bed (Bonfante 2004). She is no longer shown as enjoying a social position akin to her male partner. By contrast, there is Roman textual and iconographic evidence that by the first century AD, women participated in Roman banquets (Aristodemou 2011). So we see that over five or six centuries, Etruscan women are showing a more Roman behaviour while Roman women take on a more Etruscan role. The belief of what it means to exhibit a socially acceptable gender role change, suggesting that gender performance and expectations are mutable and fluid.

These feel like ideals that in principle should be already integrated into the research but sometimes the answers can pose challenges not only to our preconceptions of the past but have an impact in our present.

Arguments that re-examine mortuary practices are valuable to ensure that we are using the best possible practices but only if they are made in good faith. Many of the authors who have criticized interpretations of the phenomenon of females being buried with weapons have not, as far as I'm aware, published any follow up papers recontextualizing every *male* grave that contains weapons to see if they were in fact warriors or if there is a different role that is being symbolized so I would argue that this challenge is not being made in good faith. For example, the argument in the Birka case that the deceased was in fact a trader and the finding of weapons in a female grave only highlights their symbolism (Edberg 2019) falls flat for a number of reasons. One, there are no burial goods that would suggest a merchant role. There are no weights or scales or any luxury goods, though it does need to be said that perishable items might not have survived so any luxury foodstuffs would not show up in the record. Two, the author does not follow up with a commentary on any male warrior grave. Three, the argument is made only after the recontextualization of this burial. Bj581 was not an obscure site with very little academic attention, it was the subject of numerous papers and thesis' and yet there was general agreement in the interpretation. We cannot have one standard of methodology for female burials and one for male burials. To do so would discredit archaeology as a scientific field of inquiry.

The findings of female burials with weapons pose challenges to the current mainstream social beliefs - how "natural" are gender roles? It sounds trite to say that we all live in society, but the implications of that are that we all have a stake in how we are perceived in that society. Do the cultural and social conventions work for us or against us? As a woman, the current belief

in bioessentialism of gender roles limits my opportunities. How often is the argument that women are too emotional to be good leaders raised? Women are impacted by the fact that some employers are reluctant to hire women because they are expected to take time off to have children, therefore costing the workplace an employee. The ways in which our understanding of the past impacts our choices in the present. We as archaeologists have a responsibility in representing the past accurately and with all the complexities and nuances that it holds so that it is not so easily co-opted as a tool of coercion, control, and propaganda as we have seen it used in the past. Our identities and political systems are constantly being negotiated and like it or not, the data that we provide will continue to be used in the future.

Those portions of society that currently hold more power have an inherent stake in preserving that power which can affect who research is done. One of these ways is to continuously move the goalposts in order to continue the perception that powerful women are a modern invention, a fad that runs counter to our natures. The argument was: women have never been warriors and leaders because where's the archaeological evidence? So when burials with weapons, with symbols of authority, with indications that women had agency are brought up, they are discredited with interpretations that they're buried with weapons because they're a gift or just a ritual symbolizing their relationship to a male. Some will grudgingly admit that perhaps they have proximity to power because they are the wives of chiefs and they may have some authority after the death of said chief, but they could never inherently just be a chief. It seems like for some, no amount of evidence will ever be enough. "Although women of the Przeworsk culture may have occasionally participated in armed combat, there is little evidence that they may be called warrior-women" (Bochnak 2020, p. 11). The fact that no such challenge is presented to the men of the Przeworsk culture betrays that this is not about the data, it's about

challenging one of the foundations of patriarchal societies. The implications that gender roles are variable and not biologically imposed and that we as individuals and as societies can change them would have quite literally world-wide consequences and for those who benefit from patriarchal structures, can be quite scary. But these biases, human as they are, have no place in the practice of good science. There is not enough evidence yet to say that women in Etruria were warriors any more than there is to say that Viking Age women regularly engaged in the practice of military pursuits. But we see that there are societies like the Scythians and the Sarmatians where that gender gap was much smaller than previously imagined. If we celebrate the oddities and pursue the implications then we will arrive at an understanding of the past which is more nuanced, more complex, more complete, and, I would argue, far more exciting.

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