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Skylla and the Etruscan Sea-Monster: Artistic Elements in a Bronze Figurine from Cetamura del Chianti, Italy

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Abstract

Among the archaeological finds from the Etruscan artisans' sanctuary at Cetamura del Chianti is a pair of bronze figurines, one partial and one complete, depicting a creature with the head and torso of a human female ending in a pair of fish-tails. These figurines served to decorate the handle attachments of a bronze wine-bucket, Situla L, which was found in a well at the site, with an estimated date in first half of the third century BCE. The figure depicted on these attachments has been identified as a Skylla figure. In Greek art from the fifth century BCE onward, Skylla is depicted as a half-maiden, half-sea-monster with dogs protruding from her waist and genital area. However, as this figure displays no canine iconography, and as Cetamura is a distinctly Etruscan site, it seems more suitable to categorize her among the several varieties of sea monsters and merpeople found in Etruscan art before and during the third century BCE. Among these Etruscan images, the term Skylla usually refers to an iconographic category of female hybrid creatures rather than to a specific mythological figure. This paper will examine the figure from Cetamura in comparison with a number of Etruscan and Italian artifacts which are similar in iconography, location, chronology, and function. This will ultimately demonstrate that, of the surrounding artistic and cultural influences, she most closely represents an Etruscan artistic tradition of sea-monsters, whose shapes, poses, and iconographic varieties persisted from the Archaic Period well into the Roman encroachments of the third century BCE and beyond.

1. The Artifact in Question: Figure L from Situla L

The Archeological site at Cetamura del Chianti sits nestled in the hills of Tuscany in Italy, roughly between the cities of Florence and Siena. The site shows evidence of settlements from numerous periods in the last several millennia, including periods of both Etruscan and Roman presence. During the Etruscan period in particular, the site has been identified as an artisans' sanctuary, where craftsmen created objects for both use and decoration. A particularly intriguing feature at Cetamura is a well in which a number of artifacts and debris were deposited over the years. Among these artifacts is the bronze Situla L, a wine-bucket, on which was found a pair of handle attachments shaped in the form of a female figure, Figure L, with upraised arms and crossing fish-tails instead of human legs. Dated by its surroundings to the early second century BCE, this figure has been designated as a Skylla figure. Skylla, as a mythological entity, first appears in Homer's *Odyssey* before as a sea-monster before appearing in a more humanized form in other Greek myths and works of art as half-woman, half-sea creature with dogs sprouting from her waist or genitals. Within the realm of Etruscan art, however, the name Skylla refers more to a type of figure – specifically, a hybrid of a human woman and a sea-creature – rather than to a distinct mythological character. In Etruscan art, iconographic elements are often creatively added or omitted from such figures, as is the case with Figure L, which displays no canine imagery as she would according the more precise Greek definition of

Skylla. An examination of Figure L with other Etruscan and Italian Skylla imagery shows that she fits within an Etruscan artistic tradition that continued well into the period of Roman domination on the Italian peninsula.

The figure in question can be seen below along with provenance and a descriptive summary:

Bronze handle attachments from Situla L, containing depiction of female human / sea-creature hybrid (expanded from previous description)
Inv. C-2013-1083. Prov. 5N/18W.102.A
Complete attachment height: 7 cm width: 3.5 cm weight: 91 g
Belly and tails attachment height: 2 cm width: 3.5 cm weight: 20 g
Munsell of paste:

Figure 1 - Situla L handle attachments featuring hybrid figure

Two handle attachments (fig. 1), no handle identified. Point of attachment to situla is unclear due to deterioration of situla body. Attachments are solid cast images of a hybrid creature, with human torso terminating in two overlapping fish tails in place of legs. One attachment completely preserved, the other consisting only of the legs and abdomen. The complete figure shows a smooth, rounded curve from the torso to a narrow waist and back out to wide hips and a round belly, suggesting female gender. Figure is in a largely symmetrical frontal pose with upraised arms. Her hands support a bell-shaped element with a single perforation into which a handle could be inserted. This element shows a curving projection on each side and a rounded one at the top. The reverse is curved to fit into the shape of the bucket. The figures show pitting and loss of visual detail due to wear or deterioration. Both attachments display traces of lead, likely used to attach them to the situla. Coloration of complete figure, after washing (with situla, fig. 2), shows patches of blue-green ranging in shade from light to dark, as well as reddish-brown patches and spots of lighter brown, the latter often where figure appears most worn.

Figure 2. Situla L with complete handle attachment

The exact nature and identity of the figure depicted is uncertain. Due to the combination of "fish" and "woman" elements, the "Skylla" label has used in describing her. However, her lack of several elements common among the depictions in Greek art of the Skylla specific to several Greek myths leaves available a wider range of possibilities in interpreting her significance. Several such possibilities exist within the broader scope of the Etruscan Skylla type. Cetamura is an Etruscan site, and figures of mermen, including one quite similar in form to the figure in question, have been found in Etruscan art dating as far back as the Archaic, with mermaids also appearing in following centuries.[1] The two-tailed, symmetrical pose is common among human-marine hybrids on many artifacts found in Italy and beyond, and the Etruscans were not only early innovators in such figures, but are known for combining a variety of motifs in their depictions of them.[2] Thus, the figure depicted here might conceivably be a Skylla without visible canines, a more generic mermaid, or another marine entity not yet identified.

2. Skylla: Mythological and Artistic Background

The figure of the sea-monster Skylla has its oldest and arguably best-known origin from Greece in the the *Odyssey* of Homer. Here she, along with the whirlpool Charybdis, guards a strait through which Odysseus must sail, forcing him to deliberately lose six of his men to her predations rather than perish in the inescapable Charybdis. In Homer, Skylla does not assume the half-human form seen in later depictions. Here, "her voice is indeed but the voice of a new-born whelp, but she herself is an evil monster, nor would anyone be glad at the sight of her . . . she has twelve feet, all mishapen, and six necks, exceeding long, and on each one an awful head and therein three rows of teeth, thick and close, and full of black death."[3]

After the *Odyssey*, very little art or literature involving Skylla has been found until the fifth century BCE. She then reemerges in a much more feminine form. Artistic representations now portray her as a hybrid figure with a woman's head and torso, fishtail, and dog heads or protomes.[4] This change is also reflected in a variety of Greek and Roman literature, where several versions of Skylla myths of origin can be found. In these, Skylla is described as a woman changed into a hybrid monster by a jealous romantic rival, in one version by Circe as Skylla's rival for Glaucus, and in another by Amphitrite with Poseidon as the object of her envy. An additional story tells of Skylla the daughter of King Nisos of Megara, who fell in love with the invading King Minos and betrayed her father by removing his lock of purple hair which had protected the city.[5] However, despite her Homeric and generally Greek origins, from the Classical Period onward, Skylla was more popular in Italy than in Greece. This is clearly evidenced

by the significantly larger number of depictions found in or near Italy compared with those found in or around Greece.[6] One possible reason for this is the association of Skylla, found in traditions from the fifth century BCE onward,[7] with the Italian side of the Straits of Messina between the Italian peninsula and Sicily.[8] Whatever the ultimate causes, it is the Italian setting that is home to much of the development of the Skylla figure.

The figure of Skylla, as handed down from Homer and then reinvented in Greece and the Hellenic cultures of *Magna Graecia* in southern Italy is one possible categorization of the Cetamura figure. A second major artistic influence in Italy was the Etruscans, who occupied central Italy. While Etruscan art used forms and styles clearly influenced by Greek culture, they nonetheless developed their own, often distinctive character in what they chose to portray and how they portrayed it.[9] In particular, the Etruscan creativity in combining various elements in their depictions of sea monsters, long observed by scholars,[10] introduced aspects unique to Etruscan art rather than purely derivative of Hellenic predecessors.[11] The resulting influence can be seen in a number of Italian artifacts from the Archaic Period until the disappearance of Etruscan art around 100 BCE in the Late Hellenistic.[12]

These two influences, the Greek and the Etruscan, were the primary artistic customs from which Italian art in the Hellenistic Period was formed. Of course, during the centuries prior and during this period communication between the peoples of Italy, especially under the gradually unifying expansion of Rome, caused some mingling of their styles and motifs, and this certainly applies to depictions of various anthropomorphic marine entities, including Skylla. The artifacts discussed below illustrate some of these varieties, and show how the Cetamura figure fits into the larger artistic framework as an article of distinctly Etruscan style in a period when that tradition was very near to its end.

3. Comparanda: Other Depictions of Skylla with Common Factors to Figure L

The image of a giant on an Etruscan black-figure vase painting (fig. 3) shows an early example of the artistic pedigree of the Cetamura figure. Attributed to the Micali Painter and dated between c. 525 and 500 BCE, the winged giant in question is portrayed in full frontal view, in a symmetrical pose with its arms raised as it lifts a

Figure 2 – Etruscan black-figure vase, c. 525 – 500 BCE

boulder. The giant is an "anguiped," with snakes in place of his legs from the waist down, terminating in snake heads instead of feet. These snakes overlap twice in a "braided" pattern.[13] The symmetrical frontal pose, the upraised arms supporting an object above, and the overlapping animal legs are all features in common with the Cetamura figure, despite the latter being found among surroundings dated over three centuries later. Another notable parallel is the fact that, just as a Skylla label, albeit not necessarily the strict identity from Greek myth, is applied to the Cetamura figure despite the absence of the canine motif common in many Skylla images, this giant was initally labeled as Typhon, the monstrous giant who fought against Zeus. Yet the argument has been made that this giant is inconsistent with the usual iconography of Typhon depictions, and is instead a non-specific giant in a generic gigantomachy.[14] If so, this figure also provides an excellent early example of Etruscan art creating variants within a genre rather than adhering to specific mythological paradigm, and therefore strengthens the possibility that the Cetamura figure is another such variant. The fact that almost all of the giant's iconography at some point appears in depictions of Skylla – as well as other figures - highlights just how seemingly interchangeable various elements are in Etruscan art, and how difficult it can be to clearly identify a figure such as the one from Cetamura as a specific character such as Skylla.

One find particularly similar to the Cetamura figure is a bronze ornament in the shape of a merman (fig. 4), also from the sixth century BCE. The dimensions, pose, subject, and even the craftsmanship suggest a clear correlation between the two. He is a bilateral pisciped figure (i.e., with two fish-tails in place of legs) in a frontal pose, and the rounded shape of his head is similar to the Cetamura figure, and would be more so were it not for his beard. While his scaly legs differ from her apparently smooth ones (if one looks past the wear), their surface looks somewhat similar to that of the element she supports with her upraised arms.

Figure 4. Archaic bronze merman

This element is pitted beyond the wear seen on the Cetamura figure herself, and its similarity to the merman's legs raises the possibility of a fish motif with protrusions that are in fact fins. Unfortunately, the artifact's deterioration makes this difficult to ascertain. Nonetheless, the merman's pose with elbows out and forearms down represents one of the two common poses for many similar Etruscan figures, the other being upraised arms as seen in the Cetamura figure. Another bronze merman (fig. 5) of similar size and style, this one dating to the early fifth century BCE, shows a second example of the merman figure. This one is somewhat more clearly detailed, especially in the head and face, and shows only a single tail extending to the right, although the symmetry is preserved by the body of a warrior being held by the merman which extends to the left in place of the second tail. These two figures show that a merman motif quite similar to that of the Cetamura figure was an element of Etruscan art as early as the Archaic Period.

Figure 5. Classical bronze merman

The two bronze figurines below represent an archaic Etruscan bronze merman and mermaid, respectively. While the mermaid, and likely the merman as well, were probably intended to be viewed in profile rather than frontally, as were the previous images, their three-dimensional shape would still have allowed the observer to look at their fronts and notice nearly symmetrical poses similar to the Cetamura image and the artifacts mentioned above.

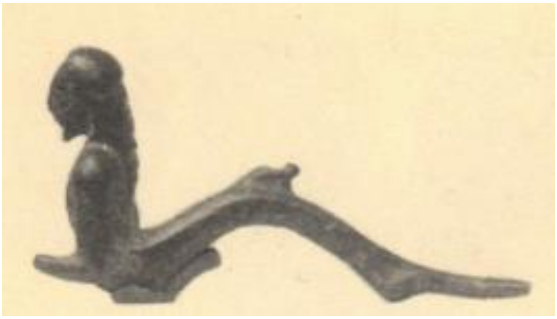

Figure 6. Archaic bronze merman

Figure 7. Archaic bronze mermaid

Unlike those, however the pair shown here each have a single tail stretching out behind them rather than two intertwining ones. A key aspect demonstrated by these two figurines is that a female counterpart to the merman figure existed in the Etruscan body of art at a similar time. Furthermore, the lack of dogs or any other Skylla iconography suggests that the mermaid figure posessed her own distinct, albeit possibly generic, identity. This illustrates the difficulty in narrowing down the identity of the Cetamura figure within the range of the broader Etruscan as well as the specific Greek Skylla given her similar lack of iconography, particularly in light of artistic precedents of alternative motifs.

A clay *askos*, or flask (fig. 8), from southern Italy dated c. 300 BCE displays a much less ambiguous depiction of Skylla in relief on each side. This is one of several *askoi*, which occur in both this shape and the shape of figure 7 below to display a Skylla image. On this *askos*, two sea-snakes rise from her waist, two dogs extend below it, and she holds her arms upraised holding a sword and scabbard in a symmetrical frontal pose similar to that of the Cetamura figure.

Figure 8. Clay askos, c. 300 BCE

This flask shows an Etruscan influence, both in the twin tails of the figure[15] and in the pose of the Skylla figure. While the previous artifacts mentioned have illustrated aspects of early Etruscan art that demonstrate the difficulties of identifying figures as a specific figure or type such as Skylla, the similarity of this Skylla to those figures provides a clear example of how narrow the distinction can be. In this case, only the dogs, sword, and snakes in place of fins clearly distinguish this Skylla stylistically from the Cetamura figure. The two are also closer chronologically, which might argue in favor of a closer correlation were it not for their considerable geographic disparity, with the askos from the south of Italy, a considerable distance from Etruscan Cetamura. They do nonetheless posess a correlation in function in that both figures appear on liquid-bearing vessels, perhaps particularly appropriate given the marine motif.

The same is also true of another *askos* (fig. 9) from Canosa in the southern part of Italy, similarly dated c. 300 BCE. Unlike the previous vessel, this one has a slightly spheroid rather than circular shape, and Skylla is sculpted along the top ridge, with her torso upright immediately behind the spout. In her left hand is a fish, and in her right a dish containing a blue cake. Two canine protomes emerge from her waist, one on each side of the spout. Although this figure differs slightly from the Cetamura figure in having a single tail and in her more three-dimensional shape, her pose remains symmetrical, with her arms evenly placed upon the rim of the spout. One particularly noticeable feature is the decorative headgear covering her painted red hair, which raises the question whether the visible arc above the head of the Cetamura figure could be some sort of potentially identifying hair or headgear. Unfortunately, her deteriorated state makes such identification difficult.

Figure 9. Ceramic askos, c. 300 BCE

The figure shown at right (fig. 10) is a relief depiction of a Skylla-like sea monster on a funerary urn from Chiusi. This figure, with wings and two fishtails, appears in much the same pose as the Cetamura figure, with the notable exceptions of the wings, the asymmetrical position of the arms, and slight rotation of the body to her left. The date estimated for this artifact is in the late third century BCE, placing her in closer proximity to the Cetamura figure both chronologically and geographically than were the aforementioned *askoi*. In addition, in her lack of canine companions, she shares with the Cetamura figure the distinction of having some, but not all, of the characteristics of the traditional mythological Skylla, thereby showing, in a specimen closer to the Etruscan home regions, the Etruscan variety in iconography. Finally, the presence of this figure on a burial object in a tomb also illustrates the significant cultural association with the afterlife which sea-monsters held among the Etruscans.

Figure 10. Etruscan funerary urn, late 3rd century BCE

4. Conclusion: A Persistent Etruscan Influence

The examination of the above artifacts provides examples of several key aspects surrounding the Cetamura figure. First, it demonstrates the variety of iconographic elements used by the Etruscans in their numerous depictions of sea-monsters. That such an innovative assortment of features was dreamt of by their artists reveals a large significance held by such creatures. The mixing and matching of these motifs leads to a second realization: that placing a specific mythological identity upon one of these figures is a tenuous endeavor given the lack of iconographic constants. It is for this reason that scholars such as Boosen, who compiled a catalog of "Etruscan mixed-sea-creatures," often use the term "Skylla" in Etruscan art more broadly, with Boosen in particular using it in describing "a creature composed of a human, mostly female upper body and a lower body, which is designed in fish shape."[16] As she goes on to explain, "the Etruscan Scylla was hardly viewed as mythologically fixed, a special sea creature, rather than one belonging to the world of demonic creatures." Thus, within the Etruscan context at Cetamura, the Cetamura figure could reasonably be described as a mermaid, a sea-monster, a sea-demon or as a Skylla – but could probably not be accurately referred to as the mythological Skylla herself.

Yet by whatever name the Cetamura figure is called, the style in which she was crafted is perhaps her most intriguing feature. As summarized in the comparisons above between her and other similar figures in Etruscan and Italian art, the style to which she bears the greatest resemblance is that of the merman figures from the late Archaic and early Classical periods. While these are not the only figures with which she shares similarities, their physical dimensions are similar, as are their rounded and stocky heads and limbs. The remarkable aspect of this similarity is the apparent chronological disparity between the two. The Cetamura figure was discovered in a well among loci dated in the second century BCE, and not far beneath other loci which suggested a Roman takeover of the site. That Cetamura should have remained in Etruscan hands for so long is not necessarily incredible, as Rome overtook the Etruscan cities and lands not all at once, but piecemeal and with varying degrees of domination, and Etruscan art did not disappear entirely until around 100 BCE.[17] But the unearthing of a figure in such an archaic style so much later in the eventful history of the Italian peninsula during the expansion of Rome is a remarkable testament to the persistence at Cetamura of Etruscan artistic traditions even as they came nearer and nearer to extinction.

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