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HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS — COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

## ETRUSCAN BRAZIER

The Etruscans, a people that inhabited the area in Italy north of Rome, bordered by the rivers Tiber and Arno, like the Greeks never organized themselves into an integrated state. Still, their big urban centres, that started to emerge in the second half of the eighth century B.C., and the surrounding territories under their control constituted political units similar to the Greek city-states. They had a common language, which so far has not been entirely deciphered, and they had institutions in common, nevertheless, the city-states themselves functioned independently; their culture, including their art forms had markedly individual features.

Those settlements got prosperous and started to flourish soonest that were situated close to the mountains rich in ore. They acted as middlemen in the lively commerce with Greek and Phoenician merchants, and had their profit of the same. Fairly soon a seaside town in Southern Etruria sprang into prominence among them — it was Caere, Cisca in Etruscan, Agylla in Greek, the present day Cerveteri. The town lay on an eighty-meter high flank of the Tolfa mountains, six kilometres from the sea and approximately forty kilometres from Rome to the northwest. (Today's town takes up only a fragment of the territory of the ancient city.) The settlement was separated by

wide ditches from the cemeteries which surrounded it almost completely, and which were standing on their own according to the general custom. The best known of these can still be visited, it is the so called Banditaccia necropolis, northwest of the town, whose tumuli surrounded with stones were the final resting places for the richest families, and the excavations of which resulted in a uniquely detailed picture on the life and culture of the inhabitants in the town's heyday, the period between the seventh and the fourth centuries.

The products of the local Caeretan workshops can be clearly distinguished from the series of objects imported in great numbers from Egypt, the Near East and Greece. The local artisans were naturally interested in everything they could pick up in skill from the objects coming from across the sea, but at the same time they developed a number of new types that were unmistakably Etruscan, moreover, clearly Caeretan, and which, judging by the great number of the surviving pieces, must have been extremely popular among the local customers.

Among these types can be found the products of a potter's workshop, which are usually mentioned as 'red ware' after their most striking feature. The workshop that flourished for at least a hundred years starting from the last quarter of the seventh century specialized in only two shapes of vessels produced by identical methods. One is a 70-90-centimetre tall, handleless storage vase (pithos in Greek), ovoid in shape, which is represented in the collection of the museum only by the fragment of a single vessel, the other is the brazier, which was produced in two sizes:

a smaller one, which was 30 centimetres in diameter, and a bigger one, 50 centimetres in diameter, of which variant the Department of Antiquities has acquired a complete specimen recently. The vessels were made of roughly finished, grainy clay (impasto), thrown on a potter's wheel, the thickness of their wall is approximately 1,5–2 centimetres. Both types

were assembled of several parts, and the surface where these were joined was smoothed over before getting the pottery into the kiln. The exhibited brazier is proof positive for the imperfections of this method, since it is clearly visible at its side where the vessel and its base were joined, and also at the top, where the signs of finishing the ornate rim separately are easily discernible. Before firing the vessels were coated with a smoother layer of clay, especially the surfaces that were visible — this coating gained a brownish red hue in the kiln. The specimens of both types were ornamented mostly with a raised frieze, but the figure scenes were never made more vivid by painting. In ornamentation the potters employed two techniques. The raised work was either impressed with a rectangular stamp onto the vessel before firing, as is demonstrated by the displayed fragment of a pithos, or they used a cylinder for stamping, as in the case of the reliefs of the exhibited brazier. This ornamental technique had had its precedents in the great cultures of the Near East, whence the Greeks and Etruscans borrowed it, mainly in the seventh century. The carving of the stamps required special skills and a good deal of experience (since the negatives of tiny, millimetre-sized figures or motifs needed to be carved into the cylinder), so it clearly was the job for a special sort of craftsmen, and not the potters, who used these stamps for decorating their vases, which work did not require any special skill. So far only one such stamp has been discovered in Etruria, bearing a floral pattern. Its material is terracotta, but it must have been quite unique in its time, since clay wore away very quickly as is demonstrated by this above stamp, so in most cases they used various, hard, semi-precious stones for the carving of the stamps, just like in the Near East.

In the friezes of the large-sized Caeretan vessels the scenes of a stamp or of a cylinder in the diameter of 4–5 centimetres are repeated. What might have caused difficulties was the inevitable conflict of the size of the vessel and the size of the impressed scene. It cannot have been a real problem in the case of the friezes impressed by stamps, since the gap between the two impressions could flexibly be made bigger. Not so with the scenes impressed with the cylinder stamp, where the craftsmen often had to resort to subsidiary solutions. In the two friezes of the exhibited brazier the scenes repeated were obviously made by the same cylinder: a stationary water-bird, two butting goats, and a man chasing a hare into a net with two raised sticks, and two dogs in front of him hot on the scent of the hare. The scene takes up approximately 21 centimetres and is repeated six times in both friezes. Still, the surface of the rim was somewhat



bigger than that, so in the upper frieze the two dogs had to be complemented by a third one (next to the fissure, on the right), and in the lower, wider frieze, somewhat to the left, the artisan had to reimpres the left part of the scene starting with the net and ending with one of the sticks of the runner.

Naturally, a stamp was used for embellishing several vessels — we can find the impressions of some of them repeated 15–20 times on the surviving hundreds of specimens. So far some five or six objects have come to light bearing the same imprint as the one we find in the frieze of the Budapest brazier. On the other hand, the impression of the pithos fragment showing a winged lion is quite unique in the corpus that has been discovered so far.

The style of the decorative friezes is the surest way to date the vessels. The stylistic changes can be clearly followed through comparison with other monuments of Etruscan art. The earlier technique was the stamped ornamentation, which was used almost exclusively on storage jars. The winged lion of the exhibited fragment displays the influence of the Corinthian orientaling style, which was characteristic of the last third of the seventh century, so it surely was made in the period between 620 and 600. The parallels of the scene of the brazier date from a later period — the popular theme of hare-hunting appears in an almost identical form in the Etruscan vase painting of the middle of the sixth century, so the dating of the Budapest vessel can be traced back to the third quarter of the century.

Though the specimens of both types of vessels were mostly found in graves, originally their place was in the habitation area, the home. The handleless, thus non-portable pithos was used for storing foodstuff, mainly grain in the house, whereas the broadrimmed, thus portable brazier could be used for holding coal (judging by the burnmarks found in some specimens), cooking and heating, so its place must have been in habitation areas where the family gathered. Both vessel types accompanied the dead to their tombs, but entombment was only their secondary function, as it has been made clear in the past few decades by the excavations of the residential area of Caere, so long neglected in favour of the work on cemeteries.

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