

"It is customary with the Etruscans to share their women in common; the women bestow great care on their bodies and often exercise even with men, sometimes also with one another; for it is no disgrace for women to show themselves naked. Further, they dine, not with their own husbands, but with any men who happen to be present, and they pledge with wine any whom they wish. They are also terribly bibulous, and are very good-looking." So said the Greek historian Theopompos in the 4th century BC in his account of the ancient Etruscans, a people who seem to have filled Theopompos's rather narrow mind with equal parts of fascination and repulsion. In his eyes, the Etruscans were a lot of wealthy degenerates who lived an extremely luxuriant lifestyle, and that was a sure sign of barbarism, tyranny and loose morals. And since the morals of any society were bound up in the morals of its women in particular, it was clear, to Theopompos at any rate, that any rumour about Etruscan women, however outrageous, probably fell short of the horrifying truth.

If we read between the lines in the quotation above, however twisted Theopompos's interpretations might be, it suggests that Etruscan women, at least the wealthy and noble ones, may have experienced a greater degree of freedom than women in any other ancient society. For one thing, they dined publicly. This in itself would be enough to shock a good chauvinistic Greek like Theopompos, since no Greek woman of character would be caught dead at a banquet with any man other than her husband. As a foreigner and a man of many prejudices, Theopompos clearly misunderstood or misinterpreted much of what he heard. So when we come to look at Etruscan women and their society, we have to use other evidence to balance him. But the problem is that we don't really have very much; and we have no literary sources from the Etruscans themselves at all. So imagine what it would be like, 2000 years in the future, trying to say something valuable about women in contemporary North American society, if all we had were Madonna videos or old episodes of "Three's Company."

Still, even if the Etruscans didn't leave us extensive literary works to tell us something about themselves, they did leave us some other sources from which we can gather a picture of at least the upper classes of their society. And the picture we get is not that of Theopompos -- but we can certainly see how a bigoted and prurient writer such as he could draw that picture by distorting and confusing the truth. We know, for example, that Etruscan men and women both attended sporting events (fully-clothed!). Greek

women did not do so (women were barred from attendance at the Olympic Games); so from there it was probably only a short leap of illogic to assume that Etruscan women probably exercised with the men, too -- and probably did it naked! But it was Greeks who exercised naked. For the most part not even Etruscan men did so.

Most of what we have from the Etruscans themselves are the artifacts they left behind, particularly the art discovered in their tombs. There is also some epigraphic evidence, a few inscriptions, particularly grave inscriptions. These inscriptions are a little more helpful than you might think, because they tell us something important about the status of women in Etruscan society. An Etruscan woman had her own name, and she was not subsumed and lost in her husband's name upon marriage. An Etruscan couple who had lost their son commemorated their offspring in an inscription which underlines their equality as parents: "Vel Partunus, son of Velthur and Ramtha Satnei". So an Etruscan woman had her own recognized identity, and was not simply the "wife/daughter of X".

The biggest component of the Etruscan evidence, though, is the artwork. And although it comes chiefly from the tombs of the rich, the art portrays the pleasures and activities of life. From it we learn that Theopompos was right in telling us that Etruscan women attended banquets; and we also learn (horror of horrors!) that these women actually reclined on couches along with the men. (At least, they did so in the early years of Etruscan society; as the centuries passed, the Etruscans came more and more under the influence of the more "upright" Romans.) But these women were not prostitutes, as they would had to have been at a Greek banquet. They were the wives of the men they are depicted with. Etruscan art gives us a picture of couples enjoying life together, rather than being continually segregated into rigid spheres of male and female activity. Theopompos, though, and

others like him, just couldn't shake their conviction that any woman with this much freedom must have loose morals and must not care whom she slept with or who the father of her children was: "The Etruscans rear all the babies that are born, not knowing who is the father in any single case. These in turn pursue the same mode of life as those who have given them nurture, having drinking parties often and consorting with all the women." The imputation that Etruscan wives were untrustworthy is just a typical slur cast on women who have too much freedom; but it's interesting to note that the Etruscans' willingness to raise (rather than expose) all their infants is rather more in line with modern views on the subject.

To the Greeks and the Romans both, the Etruscans were foreign. In spite of the Etruscan adoption of much of Greek culture, they remained alarmingly "other" when it came to the proper way to run a society, with women in their proper place. Etruscan women never were in their "proper place", or so thought those who looked in from the outside. In Livy's tales of early Roman history, when the Etruscan rulers tyrannized over Rome, we read of the unnatural ferocity of their women. Tullia, daughter of the ruler Servius Tullius and married to Tarquinius Superbus, urges her husband to kill her father and take the royal power for himself; but even that is not the worst of it. "It is thought that the deed was done at Tullia's suggestion; and such a crime was not, at least, inconsistent with her character. All agree that she drove into the forum in an open carriage in a most brazen manner, and, calling her husband from the Senate House, was the first to hail him as King. Tarquin told her to go home, as the crowd might be dangerous; so she started off, and at the top of Cyprus street...her driver was turning to the right to climb the Urbian hill on the way to the Esquiline, when he pulled up short in sudden terror and pointed to Servius's body lying mutilated on the road. There followed an act of bestial inhumanity -- history preserves the memory of it in the name of the street, the Street of Crime. The story goes that the crazed woman...drove her carriage over her father's body. Blood from the corpse stained her clothes and splattered the carriage, so that a grim relic of the murdered man was brought by those gory wheels to the house where she and her husband lived. The guardian gods of that house did not forget; they were to see to it, in their anger at the bad beginning of the reign, that as bad an end should follow." Theopompus would have thoroughly approved.