

Marriage and Mortality
*in the Tetnies Sarcophagi **

BY INGRID ROWLAND

Among the Boston Museum's Etruscan treasures, a pair of stone sarcophagi from Vulci rank as some of the most impressive, and the most touching. Containing, as their inscriptions show, two generations of the same family, the coffins each portray a married couple reclining under covers on elaborate beds; in both cases, the cover is probably the husband's round cloak or *tebenna* rather than a normal blanket.¹

One pair (Fig. 1), elderly, is richly clothed; the other husband and wife (Fig. 2), in the attractive prime of adult life, wear nothing but a rich complement of jewels (including a male bracelet), but these ornaments, along with their fashionably groomed hair, are more than enough to show how even nudity can convey every nuance of wealth and social status. Naked these two certainly are not; they are as dressed up as a Cranach Venus, and the very elaboration of their undress gives their embrace a good deal of its erotic charge. Nudity, as Larissa Bonfante has argued eloquently, is a costume like any other, and this sarcophagus serves as one of her most expressive examples:²

...we see husband and wife lying naked together in a tender embrace on a sarcophagus from Vulci in Boston. They lie under the rounded *tebenna*, which serves as a blanket, a symbol of their marriage. Such an image of a couple does not appear in Greek art. In Etruscan art, too, it is unique: but the pose of husband and wife, united on the kline, is Etruscan. Etruscan, too, is the similarity of their way of dressing—in this case, their nudity. Evidently, the Etruscans did not perceive the contrast between male and female nudity, so characteristic of Greek Classical art. What then did this “costume” signify for those who commissioned the work, or for those who saw it? Was this nudity a sign of the intimacy of the marriage bed? Or did it signify a kind of heroization of the couple, as ancestors, shown in death dressed in the Greek, manner, in a “heroic” nudity considered fitting for the afterworld? We do not know.



figure 1 – Sarcophagus of Ramtha Vishnai, ca. 450-400 B.C.E., Boston, Museum of Fine Arts. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

The findspot of the two sarcophagi is not without its problems, and some scholars simply describe it as unknown.³ In fact, we can pinpoint it with a certain degree of precision to the Ponte Rotto necropolis of Vulci. Unfortunately, that site, awarded by papal decree in the nineteenth century to Napoleon's brother Lucien Bonaparte, Prince of Canino, was excavated according to nineteenth-century standards—in other words, it was systematically looted for collectible artifacts. So long as he lived, the Prince ordered the keeping of fairly careful records, but after his death in 1840, his widow, Alexandrine von Bleschamps, did not. Under Madame's direction, excavators entered a tomb in the necropolis of Ponte Rotto in the winter of 1845-46.⁴ Her agents recorded that the Boston sarcophagi were found together. The tomb began to collapse during excavation, making further investigation difficult, but at least we can be reasonably certain that the Tetnies sarcophagi once formed a genuine pair.

In 1886, after years of haggling about prices, the fine-grained limestone sarcophagus of Larth Tetnies and Tanchvil Tarnai, with its evident influence from Greek art, was acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts.⁵ The Boston Museum's remarkable collection of nineteenth-century American sculpture, much of it actually carved in Italy by Italian artisans, suggests why its patrons would



figure 2 – Sarcophagus of Larth Tetnies and Tanchvil Tarnai, late 4th-early 3rd century B.C.E., Boston, Museum of Fine Arts. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

have preferred the silken surfaces and Grecian modeling of the younger Tetnies' sarcophagus to a powerful but rough-hewn Etruscan aesthetic, and why Museum officials originally refused to buy the second sarcophagus at the price requested by the widow Bonaparte. Instead, the sober nenfro coffin, depicting Arnth Tetnies and Ramtha Vishnai according to more strictly Etruscan canons, went to the Boston Athenaeum; it came to the Museum of Fine Arts in 1975.⁶

As with much of the rest of Vulci, Madame Bonaparte's excavators, in their rush to find exportable treasure, paid only minimal attention to the context from which they untimely ripped these two extraordinary works of Etruscan art. As a result we cannot be certain whether the sarcophagi came from the tomb in the Ponte Rotto necropolis that is now known as the Tomb of the Two Entrances, excavated in the 1880's, which bears an inscription to Marce Tetnies (CIE 5314), nor whether there is a relationship between the Ramtha Vishnai of the Boston sarcophagus and the woman of the same name described as a *batrencu* on the wall of another tomb from Vulci, the Tomb of the Inscriptions.⁷ Another Arnth Tetnies of Vulci dedicated an oinochoe in the fifth century B.C., as an inscription on its lip attests: *mi arnthial tetnies p[. . . (.)]thi velclthi*. As Dominique Briquel notes, the little pitcher may well have been dedicated by an ancestor of the well-fed patriarch Arnth Tetnies who was married to Ramtha Vishnai, but, like Ramtha Vishnai's sarcophagus it was taken from Vulci in the nineteenth century and sold to a collector in Montpellier, where it is now on display in the city museum. Hence our only certain information is the locative *velclthi* to show the connection between its dedicator Arnth Tetnies and the imposing Arnth Tetnies shown on the sarcophagus from Boston; perhaps they came from the same tomb, but we will never know.⁸

It would not be at all unusual if the Princess of Canino's Italian dealers had put some finishing touches on their Etruscan wares as they prepared them for market; there are patches and repairs in the limestone sarcophagus of Larth Tetnies and Tanchvil Tarnai, which seems never to have been completely finished, as well as conspicuous traces of stucco. The coffin of Ramtha Vishnai does not seem to have been subjected to the same kind of interventions, perhaps because of its more porous, and hence more recalcitrant, material.

Although the sarcophagus of Ramtha Vishnai and Arnth Tetnies shows a couple on its lid, it is as narrow as a coffin designed for a single occupant. Its lone inscription refers specifically to the wife, Ramtha Vishnai, and it is she whom we see when we look at the sarcophagus from its inscribed and sculpted long side. (The other long side is blank.) Her epitaph (TLE 320) describes her simply, as *ramtha vishnai arnthial tetn[i]es puia*, "Ramtha Vishnai, the wife of Arnth Tetnies", and the decoration of the sarcophagus itself focuses on this characterization. Its decorated long side, sculpted in relief, (Fig. 3) centers on the couple, Ramtha Vishnai on the left, Arnth Tetnies on the right, each of them followed by a series of attendants. Arnth Tetnies appears here as the same mature man we see on the coffin's lid, with lined face and prominent belly. His entourage bears implements that indicate high office: a curule chair, a trumpet, a rod. He grasps Ramtha Vishnai's right wrist with his right hand and carries a knotty walking stick in his left. She, in turn, drapes her left hand around his neck. Her attendants, three women and a young man, bring implements—a box, a fan, an oinochoe, a situla, a krater, and a cithara—that have been taken to imply that she also held an important position as a priestess (one scholar has suggested, because of the krater, that she must have served the wine god Fufluns).⁹

Although this meeting of the spouses has sometimes been described as a wedding procession (as it is, for example, on the Boston Museum's own website), the couple's maturity and the absence of a wedding canopy both militate against such an interpretation.¹⁰ As Otto Brendel has observed, Arnth Tetnies' walking stick implies travel; rather than the couple's wedding, he suggests, plausibly, that we must be bearing witness to their reunion in the afterlife. This is also the conclusion of L. Bouke van der Meer, who suggests that: "Maybe, this scene is an anticipation or prolepsis of Arnth's journey to the Underworld. If this hypothesis is right, Arnth was still alive when Ramtha died."¹¹

The short sides of the sarcophagus are devoted to a related theme: the journey of the deceased to the underworld. The left-hand side (Fig. 4) apparently shows Ramtha Vishnai and another elaborately dressed woman (sometimes described as an attendant) riding in a horse-drawn cart, shaded by a large parasol and driven by a coachman.¹² Standing behind the team of horses, a Vanth, a winged female death-demon, greets the women with an upraised right hand.

The right short side (Fig. 5) shows a slim, bearded man steeping into a chariot drawn by two horses, attended by a youth with a rod and a lituus, symbols of the bearded man's status as a magistrate. Although he is sometimes identified as Arnth Tetnies, his appearance in fact shares nothing in common with the portly, clean-shaven man we see elsewhere on the coffin except a prominent aquiline nose.

Brendel, with characteristic sensitivity, describes how the sarcophagus unites two themes in portraying the reunion of Ramtha Vishnai and Arnth Tetnies in the underworld:

In the front relief, we are led to conclude, the travellers are reunited. Journey's end is indicated...; it is not shown as a certain place, as in the contemporary paintings, but merely hinted at as a nondescript beyond. Two different ideas have ... become combined: the simile of the voyage, and the reassembly of the family.¹³



figure 3 – Front panel, sarcophagus of Arnth Tetnies and Ramtha Vishnai. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts Boston.



figure 4 – Left side panel, Sarcophagus of Arnth Tetnies and Ramtha Vishnai. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

Hence the sarcophagus of Ramtha Vishnai and Arnth Tetnies has been designed in every detail to suggest that its occupant was a woman of high station, but above all a devoted wife, proud of maintaining a marriage that lasted into the pair's old age.

In many ways, the double sarcophagus of Larth Tetnies and Tanchvil Tarnai provides a very different image of husband and wife. In the first place, the sarcophagus of the younger couple is definitely a coffin built for two, whereas Arnth Tetnies and Ramtha Vishnai, neither of them particularly svelte, share a narrower bed. The two younger spouses reach across their broad mattress toward each other with room to spare on all sides. Their



figure 5 – Right side panel, Sarcophagus of Arnth Tetnies and Ramtha Vishnai. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

images are carved in fine-grained white limestone, reminiscent of marble, a more difficult material to work than rough-and-ready nenfro. The glamorous couple also has a more glamorous grave inscription (TLE 321): *tanchvîl tarnai an farthnache marces tarnes ramthesc chaireals: larth tetnies an farthnache arnthetals tetnis ramthecs visnaials*. No matter what the meaning of *farthnache* may be, the inscription's parental names alone are enough to reveal Larth Tetnies as the handsome son of the elderly couple commemorated by the nenfro sarcophagus, and Thancvil Tarnai as their daughter-in-law.

Ambros Pfiffig has interpreted the verb *farthnache* to mean “dedicated”, implying



figure 6 – Long side. Sarcophagus of Larth Tetnies and Tanchvil Tarnai. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

that Tanchvil Tarnai and Larth Tetnies “dedicated” their sarcophagus.¹⁴ Giovanni Colonna, on the other hand, has argued for a connection between the word *farthan* and Latin *genius*, in which case the passive form *farthnache* can be taken to mean “was born of”, and this translation, supported by context (the parental names), is more generally accepted translation of the epitaph.¹⁵

The most striking aspect of this extraordinary sarcophagus is, of course, the open eroticism of these two spouses who are also still lovers, physically beautiful, rich, and eager. Larth Tetnies and his wife Tanchvil are also very much *à la mode*, with Larth’s luxuriant beard, Tanchvil’s earrings, and the leaping Greek-style Pyrrhic dancers (Fig. 7) on the front of their ample sarcophagus. Husband and wife are certainly not resting; they gaze at each other with open eyes. Indeed, no member of this busy assemblage is resting, neither human nor animal: Greeks are fighting Amazons (Fig. 6), lions are devouring a bull (Fig. 8), griffins a deer (Fig. 9), and nude youths are practicing their martial arts on horseback and on foot. Everything is as stylish as stylish could be in fourth-century Vulci, from the bead-and-reel molding that frames three sides of the sarcophagus to the masterful low relief of the couple’s feet and their artfully flattened pillows.

There is only one problem with what looks like a perfect example of a family tomb: most scholars agree that the sleekly classical sarcophagus of Tanchvil Tarnai and Larth Tetnies belongs to an earlier style than the stern, rugged coffin that bears the images of Ramtha Vishnai and Arnth Tetnies, however parental they may look.¹⁶ The son’s limestone sarcophagus has been dated to the latter half of the fourth century, anywhere between 350 and 330 B.C.; the mother’s nenfro coffin to the turn of the fourth century into the third, from about 300 to 280 B.C. The inscribed epitaphs show the same chronological pattern: the



figure 7 – Long side. Sarcophagus of Larth Tetnies and Tanchvil Tarnai. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

thetas on the limestone coffin of Larth Tetnies and Tanchvil Tarnai are square, hence earlier, than the round thetas on the coffin of Ramtha Vishnai. Consequently the handsome young husband who lies gazing for eternity at his young, stylish wife may look like the sleek, sophisticated offspring of sternly traditional parents, but in fact the younger couple are the ones who are locked within an older era, not the images of their visibly older parents. Larth Tetnies and Tanchvil Tarnai, as unendingly beautiful as the figures on Keats' Grecian Urn, are just as certainly relics of the past.

These portraits of two generations of married couples, so different and yet so intimate, already put us very close to some of the great unfathomable mysteries of life: love, marriage, family, not to mention ideas of beauty and taste. The problem presented by their chronology makes the contrast between them all the more acute. Confronting the problem of the coffins' relative dating, Emeline Richardson has suggested that the younger couple's sarcophagus had been designed for the parents but was then appropriated by the son:¹⁷

The mother's sarcophagus looks somewhat later than the son's...We may conjecture that the Greek [style] sarcophagus was ordered for the parents but that the father died far from Vulci and the son kept the splendid sarcophagus for himself, commissioning a local sculptor to make one of the same type for his mother which would also serve as a cenotaph for his father.

Richardson's conjectural circumstances, however, do not account for the fact that the sculpted husband who shares a bed with Ramtha Vishnai looks just as old as she; if Arnth



figure 8 – Short side (detail). Sarcophagus of Arnth Tetnies and Tanchvil Tarnai. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

Tetnies did indeed die far from home, he does not seem, from the two portraits on his wife's sarcophagus, to have done so twenty-odd years before her own death. Instead, the differing imagery and differing styles of the sarcophagi would seem to suggest another, more tragic circumstance: that Ramtha Vishnai and Arnth Tetnies buried their son Larth Tetnies and his wife Thanchvil Tarnai when these two were in the prime of their lives. The coffin that enshrined their son's marriage, and the couple's youth, beauty, and sexual energy may be recalling something that otherwise had been irrevocably lost; as Keats would say of his Grecian Urn, "Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair". Furthermore, if Larth Tetnies' parents had outlived their son and their daughter-in-law by twenty years or more, their own tastes, and local taste in general, might well have changed when the time came for them to face their own burial arrangements.

We might turn again, then, to the bearded magistrate who mounts a chariot on the right side of Ramtha Vishnai's sarcophagus. If her bearded son Larth Tetnies had predeceased her, he might well be expected to join the procession gathered to meet his mother as she arrived in the underworld (and to display a profile like that of his father Arnth Tetnies). Then, perhaps, the woman who shares the parasol-shaded cart with Ramtha Vishnai on the



figure 9 – *Short side (detail). Sarcophagus of Arnth Tetnies and Tanchvil Tarnai. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts Boston.*

coffin's opposite side is not an anonymous attendant, but an individual: Tanchvil Tarnai.

In support of this interpretation of their family history, we might also look again at the expressions on the faces of Ramtha Vishnai and Arnth Tetnies. Rather than gazing rapturously at one another like their son and his wife, each looks slightly downward, pensively confronting eternity. Closely connected physically, they are nonetheless shown engrossed in their own individual thoughts, sober if not quite somber. We will never know for certain whether they are contemplating the loss of their son, or simply looking back on lives spent in high, responsible office. Neither are we likely to know for certain whether the marriage of Larth Tetnies and Tanchvil Tarnai resulted in a further generation of the Tetnies family; the relationship of the Marce Tetnies inscribed on the wall of the Tomb of the Two Entrances to the occupants of the two Boston sarcophagi is unclear. Perhaps Larth Tetnies and Tanchvil Tarnai are shown as lovers in the afterlife to compensate for what failed to happen in the real world of ancient Vulci; perhaps, as Bonfante has suggested, their embrace has been heroized because of its role in the great mystery of generation. By the accidents of time and circumstance, we simply cannot know.

Vast differences of size, subject, budget and artistic style separate Boston's sophis-

ticated coffin from the tiny burial urn of an anonymous Volterranean baby in the Museo Guarnacci who stares wide-eyed at death beneath a blanket too small to protect him. Yet these two affecting works of Etruscan art may also express the same terrible sadness, of parents, no matter what their age or level of income, who must face the death of a child. The baby is perhaps the saddest surviving work of Etruscan art; the Tetnies sarcophagus, by contrast, one of the most vibrant, but the ravening lion and griffin who decorate its short sides suggest that the artists who created both works, and the parents who may have commissioned them, shared awareness of the same harsh laws of existence.

The sarcophagus of Ramtha Vishnai suggests another truth of nature; she may well have outlived all the rest of her family, or at least her menfolk, and indeed Etruscan epitaphs commemorate a goodly number of women over seventy¹⁸. It is probably significant that she seems to have been buried alone, and that the coffin's design focuses so particularly on her; it seems plausible, given the coherence of its concepts, that she commissioned it. For any Etruscan grave monument, we can only wonder who really did the choosing, and when: whether the Etruscans, like the Egyptians, acted "before need" (as contemporary funeral directors sometimes phrase it), or whether they made these decisions in the midst of their bereavement, with all the attendant confusion. Neither do we have any idea about which members of the family made the decisions, although it is probably significant that we have yet to find a grave inscription that describes an Etruscan man as "husband", whereas many epitaphs, like that of Ramtha Vishnai, say *puia*, "wife". Surely, however, actual Etruscan responses to bereavement, like ours, were as various as the circumstances of their lives and deaths.

Clearly, each of the Tetnies sarcophagi in its own way has been carefully fashioned to tell the story of a marriage, suggesting that a careful, conscious set of decisions went into its making. The limestone sarcophagus of the younger generation presents mythological events and an eternally incipient embrace; the *nenfro* sarcophagus of the parents emphasizes high office and family in a world of Etruscan realities. If Arnth Tetnies had commissioned the sarcophagus of Ramtha Vishnai, we might expect its main view to focus on him rather than on his wife; her coffin, while commemorating a married couple, is concentrated notably on the female half of the pair. If Richardson is correct that Arnth Tetnies died away from home—and the absence of his epitaph from the sarcophagus certainly supports such an idea—then the tomb that contained these two spectacular monuments may well testify above all to the life, taste, and spirit of Ramtha Vishnai, a woman who chose to commemorate the enduring power of love in its various forms over the equally inescapable facts of bereavement and solitude.

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NOTES

1. The tebenna is mentioned, e.g., by Bonfante 1989, 567 (quoted below); Haynes 2000, 287.
2. Bonfante 1989, 543-570, esp. 567.
3. So Haynes 2000, 287: "We do not know from which tomb in the Ponte Rotto necropolis the sarcophagus came and what the relationship was between its occupant the hatrencu (?) Ramtha Visnei, whose name is preserved among the funerary inscriptions in Chamber V of the Tomb of the Inscriptions".
4. Dennis 1848, 405-412.
5. Comstock and Vermeule 1976, no. 383.
6. Comstock and Vermeule 1976, no. 384.
7. Haynes 2000. See also Briquel 2003, 7, citing S. Gsell, *Fouilles dans le nécropole di VULCI* (Rome, 1891) 245. [See now, C. Berrendonner et al., *REE in StEtr* 71 (2005) 232-237, no. 88—RDD.]
8. Briquel 2003, 7. The inscription, *mi arnth i al tetnies u i i velcl i*, is now also published online by the Etruscan Texts Project as ETP 83 [and in *StEtr* 71 (2005) 233—RDD].
9. van der Meer 2004, 73.
10. Wedding: "presumably the couple's marriage", Museum of Fine Arts website, Accession number 1975.799. Brendel 1978, 381 argues against a wedding.
11. Van der Meer 2004, 73.
12. The woman is described as a "maid" by Brendel 1978, 382 and as an "attendant" by Haynes 2000, 287 and van der Meer 2004, 72.
13. Brendel 1978, 381.
14. Pfiffig 1969, 200, 202, 288.
15. Bonfante and Bonfante 2002, 216 define *farthan*, *farthn-* as "generate".
16. Comstock and Vermeule 1976, nos. 383-384 date the limestone sarcophagus to 330-300 BC and the *nenfro* to 300-280 BC without mentioning the inscriptions. Haynes 2000, 287ff., starting from the inscriptions, seems to regard the *nenfro* sarcophagus as earlier: "mid-4th century vs. second half of 4th century." My thanks to Richard De Puma for these references.
17. Richardson 1964, 144.
18. As noted above, van der Meer 2004, 73, opts for the opposite conclusion: that Arnth Tetnies outlived his wife and commissioned this sarcophagus for her. Larthi Cracnei of Volterra was 75 at the time of her death, as were at least two other women whose urns are now preserved in the Museo Guarnacci of Volterra.

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