

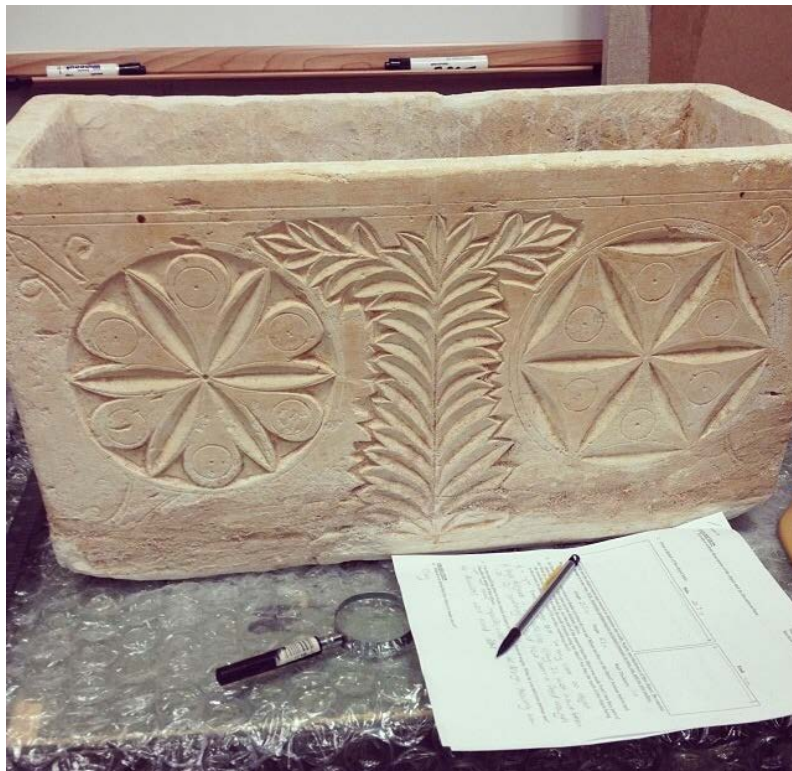
An Ossuary and Ash Urn in Ancient Italy

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Artifact 1: Ash Urn



Artifact 2: Ossuary



Imagine that you are an archeologist. You are out in the hot, summer sun, investigating the site of an ancient Roman civilization and you come across something quite extraordinary. It is a rectangular box, about 60 cm in length, 28 cm in width, and 32 cm in height. It is decorated quite beautifully on one side of it and you begin to question what could this box have been used for? It is somewhat similar in shape and material to the ancient ash urn that was discovered earlier that week by someone else in your group. The ash urn had truly mesmerized you as you studied the exquisite detailed scene on the side of it. How did were these people able to carve such a meticulous depiction into stone like that? This new discovery is a little different though—its characteristics don't exactly match that of the ash urn. You decide to embark on a journey to discover everything you could know about these ancient wonders. After much evaluation and research, you conclude that the new object that you found is indeed an ossuary. This paper contains the observations you had made along your journey regarding both marvelous objects and your final conclusions.

Where do we go after death? This is a question that we all must have considered at some point in our lives. For the Romans/Etruscans over two thousand years ago, this concept was more than just an inquiry. Death and burial were ingrained into their traditions, culture, and religion. They lived in preparation for death. In order to begin to understand the lives of these ancient people, we will be studying two artifacts that depict the differences and similarities of their reverence and traditions regarding death. Artifact #1, an ossuary, was used during the 1th century BCE. Considering that ossuaries have not

been a part of our burial traditions for the past 2,000 years (*Jesus Family Tomb: The Use of Ossuaries in Ancient Jewish Burial Practices*), we can conclude that their traditions and beliefs differ from ours today. Why is it that they felt the need to rebury a body after it had already been decomposed? Something that is considered illegal in modern society was once a regular tradition in the ancient world. On the other hand, Artifact #2 is an ash urn, which was introduced to ancient Italy in the 4th century BCE. While our ash urns today are very different, the process of cremation is still prevalent in modern times. How did ash urns impact ancient society compared to how they impact ours? By comparing and contrasting the ash urn and the ossuary, we will be able to peak into ancient civilization and discover that, even though these ancient peoples' beliefs and customs differed and have evolved over time, one thing remained consistent: burial was considered a precious, important tradition. So let's travel back to ancient Italy and discover how the Etruscan/Roman idea of death evolved from the 4th century BCE to the 1st century BCE.

It is important to note that, during the 4th century BCE, the Etruscans occupied most of the Italian peninsula. It was from them that the ash urn was discovered. During the Hellenistic Period, the Romans began to take over and adopt many of the Etruscan traditions (Haynes, *Etruscan Civilization: A Cultural History*, 28-29). So while ash urns are a shared tradition between the Romans and Etruscans, the use of the ossuary is exclusively the Romans'.

The function of these two objects is two to hold the remains of a deceased person. Ash urns were used to hold the ashen remains of a deceased person upon their first burial (Cancik and Schneider, *Urn*). On the other hand, an ossuary, also referred to as a bone box, contains the remains of a corpse after it was already been decomposed during its original burial. They would first bury the body in the ground or in a tomb, and then, several years later after the flesh had decomposed, they would unbury it and put the remains into an ossuary. This tradition originated among the Jews (Jesus Family Tomb..., *The Ossuary*). According to this Jewish tradition, it is believed that ossuaries became popular because of the belief that sin was of the flesh; in order for the dead to be released into heaven, their skin must decay with only the bones left for bodily resurrection. Regardless of their Jewish origins, ossuaries were used in Rome for another important purpose. The Romans held the belief that, when they died, their souls were dependent on his/her economic status in life and what they can afford in terms of burial (Aldrete, pg 83-85). Because of this, anyone who could afford it joined a burial club. Most of them did not want to take the chance of not being able to afford a proper burial, so many would join these burial clubs and would pay a monthly fee to ensure a proper burial upon their death. The burial clubs would sometimes combine their money together to purchase a mausoleum where urns containing the ashes of cremated members could be kept (Aldrete, *Daily Life in the Roman City...*, 84). Many Romans seemed particularly concerned with leaving their memory behind in elaborate, expensive tombs; however, over time, these elaborate tombs and graves were robbed. Poor people would break into

them, throw out the corpses, and use it for shelter. Churches would plunder gravesites in order to find materials they could use for building. While it is difficult to determine the exact reason for the Roman use of ossuaries, I would theorize that ossuaries were used in Rome to rebury the dead that were thrown aside or robbed. They had great reverence for their ancestors, and it is quite feasible that ossuaries were used to protect them. Some also theorize that they wanted more space and ossuaries were much smaller than caskets (Mysterious People of Italy, *The Etruscans...*). Being that the Romans were more intellectually driven and less religious than the Jews, it is difficult to determine their exact reasoning for the use of ossuaries.

In the same way, ash urns display the importance of elaborate, expensive funeral traditions as well. Before the Romans took over Italy, cremation had almost universal acceptance; however, due to various factors—such as the rise of Christianity—over the course of centuries, Roman attitudes towards the afterlife changed and the practice of inhumation took precedence over cremation (Cancik and Schneider, *Burial*). But before this was so, both inhumation and cremation were the culturally accepted custom of burying the dead. Only those who could afford cremation would do so; poor people often could not, so they just buried their dead. The funerals of the Etruscans were elaborate as well, but they're reasons for the extravagance differed from the Romans. While the Romans were preoccupied with portraying a high economic status through their graves, the Etruscans were very religious. They believed that death was a journey to the afterlife and if the dead were neglected, they may become vindictive and haunt the living

(Mysterious People of Italy, *The Etruscans...*). Roman Philosopher Seneca describes the Roman perspective of the beliefs of the Etruscans: “Whereas we (the Romans) believe lightning to be released as a result of the collision of the clouds, they (the Etruscans) believe that the clouds collide so as to release lightning, for as they attribute in so far as they occur, but rather that they occur because they must have a meaning” (Mysterious People of Italy, *The Etruscans...*). While the Etruscans and Romans occupied the same land, their perspectives on life and death varied greatly. So, even though our ash urn and ossuary appear to have very similar uses in that they held the remains of honored ancestors, the reasons for their use differed.

The physical characteristics of the ossuary and ash urn tell us a lot about how they were made and the central themes of society at the time. Our ash urn was made out of clay (*Kelsey Museum of Archaeology*) and our ossuary was made out of limestone because of its capacity to endure the humid temperatures (Jesus Family Tomb..., *The Ossuary*). Limestone is more difficult to work with than clay, which is evident in the different designs of each artifact. The ash urn has a very detailed depiction of the Greek myth of Oedipus’ sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, as they kill each other in pursuit of the kingdom of Thebes. Along with these brothers, there are two female demons that are presumably dragging them into the afterlife (*Kelsey Museum of Archaeology*). The ash urn also has a cover, which is something that the ossuary is lacking. The cover shows a man lying in bed, portraying the eternal rest of the body inside, which was typical of many ash urns. Ash urn covers usually depicted the deceased laying in a bed or enjoying

a feast; sometimes there would be another person portrayed on the cover accompanying them. Physically, the design has much more dimension and detail. A specific story is being told here. The ossuary's design is much simpler. There are two perfectly circular circles on either end of the ossuary with unique designs within them. In between the two circles is what looks like some sort of plant or vegetation springing upward.

I immediately noticed the exactness of this design and attention to detail the artist must have had when working on the ossuary. The process that was used to get this design is called chip carving (Rahmani and Sussmann, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries...*, 7). There are multiple different tools and methods used in chip carving, but the circinus is most relevant to our design. Similar to a compass, the circinus is what was used to measure out circles and curves. It was also used to carve out the perfect edges of the vegetation in the middle. There is one aspect of the decoration that I found to be out of place in comparison to the rest of the meticulous work. In the two upper corners of the ossuary, coming out of each circle, there is a design that is not as precise as the rest of the work; it looks hand carved. These are called incisions. They were put in place because of *horror vacui*, which is Latin for 'horrible empty spaces' (Rahmani and Sussmann, pg 8). If there were horror vacui on the decoration, this would imply that the creator of the design had unsophisticated taste. These incisions were freehanded onto the ossuary, holding no other purpose than to maintain the dignity of its maker. The less precise look of these incisions is due to the toughness of the limestone, whereas there are no incisions on the ash urn. In fact, ash urns were not always molded by hand. While stone carving

was a strong tradition in the land of Etruria due to their volcanic landscape (Haynes, *Etruscan Civilization: A Cultural History*, 25), our ash urn was actually most likely made with a mold. During the 2nd century onto the 1st century, ash urns were mass-produced in molds (Haynes, *Etruscan Civilization: A Cultural History*, 341). They were usually made in a number of different workshops, rather than just one. They were also once painted with vivid colors, but time and natural elements have caused this paint to fade to almost nothing. On our ash urn, very subtle traces of paint remain.

The designs on the sides of our ossuary and ash urn each portray a story that will give us insight to the cultural atmosphere at the time of its burial. As was mentioned before, Romans held the belief that one's economic status in life is what determines one's afterlife. Perhaps this belief is the reason for the vegetation design on our ossuary; one could infer that the vegetation symbolized life beyond the grave in hope that the deceased had reached the required standards. The two circles on the ossuary possibly symbolized something having to do with life and death, or perhaps the wealthy versus the poor. The vegetation could then symbolize the continued existence beyond life/death. Based on what we do know of their beliefs, it is feasible to think that this design is symbolic. This is a considered hypothesis among scholars, along with other theories that the circles represent the deceased's eyes, or wheels symbolizing reincarnation (Rahmani and Sussmann, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 25-26). Some even argue that, because there are only a few, very rare ossuaries with any written indication of deeper meaning, there is no symbolic meaning to the designs at all.

The depiction on the ash urn is much less ambiguous. The scene is of the Greek tale of Eteocles and Polyneices as they fight to the death for the reign of Thebes. After their father, Oedipus, was expelled from the country for naively killing his father and marrying his mother, both sons tried to assert their right to the throne (Hamilton, *Mythology*, 383-386). Eteocles, the youngest son, succeeded at first and expelled Polyneices from Thebes. Polyneices planned to form an army and march against Thebes. When the time came for the rival brothers to confront, the city awaited to hear who had won the throne. Turns out, neither were victorious; both had been slaughtered by the other. The violence depicted in this scene could have been symbolizing the internal conflicts between Etruscan cities or the wars with Rome that began in the 4th century BCE (*Kelsey Museum of Archaeology*).

We also are able to tell that, because of their application of Greek mythology to their own culture, Etruscans were influenced by Greek religion. We know very little about the Etruscans because none of their books or written records have survived (Buranelli, *The Etruscans...*, 23-25). What we do know is from studying artifacts, such as this ash urn, which consistently depict stories of Greek myths and gods similar to those within Greek mythology. The Etruscan economy relied on trade of their abundance mineral deposits, which resulted in significant influence from other cultures. Greek was one of their main cultivated commerce, as they imported enormous amounts of Greek pottery. Thousands of Greek artifacts have been found within Etruscan tombs (Buranelli, *The Etruscans...*, 26-29). Greek influence began its major impact during the

Orientalizing Period, which is named after the importation of vast numbers of goods. Many of the gods that the Etruscans recognized equated with similar deities in Greek mythology.

How is Greek influence relevant to our research on our ossuary and ash urn? Well, the Greek depiction on the ash urn is evidence of Greek influence during the 4th century BCE and also gives us an idea of their environment; furthermore, if we go beyond that to when the ossuary originated, we see that Greek influence has been preserved all the way up to the 1st century. Many ossuaries from the 1st century have Greek inscriptions on them, showing that the Greek language was still used (Rahmani and Sussmann, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 11) (Our ossuary does not have any inscription on it; however, as was mentioned before, our ossuary is also missing a cover and we cannot rule out the option that the inscription was on the cover). Whatever religious aspects the Romans did adopt were from the gods of the Etruscans, who, we know, adopted many of the Greek gods. The Romans looked to the Etruscans as experts on religion, to whom they consulted in many matters of ritual and interpreting the will of the gods. They also adopted many other aspects of Etruscan culture, much of which was significantly affected by Greek influence. Some of these adopted traditions include the toga, the alphabet and numbers, and architecture.

The scene of Eteocles and Polyneices is not the only evidence of Greek influence that our ash urn offers us. There is also a Greek inscription along the top right corner that reads the name of the deceased inside (*Kelsey Museum of Archeology*); however, only

part of the inscription has been preserved, and it is very difficult to decipher. The only aspect of the inscription that we can be certain of is that it says, “Vel...Vel...” Vel and Velphur were common names for men, and the female version is Velia. Because we cannot read the rest of the Greek, we cannot determine the gender of the occupant. Certain ossuaries have inscriptions as well, many of which were also written in Greek (Rahmani and Sussmann, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 11). The deceased’s name, family relationships, titles and designations, professions, origin, age, etc. are all types of inscriptions that one would typically find inside of an ossuary (Rahmani and Sussmann, pg 11-17). We cannot know for sure if our ossuary had an inscription or not because, while we can see no inscriptions, we are missing the top cover of our ossuary, which may have displayed an inscription.

An important aspect to understanding the differences of Etruscan and Roman traditions regarding death is to also compare their funeral rituals. Both groups had very different ceremonies when they were burying or cremating the dead. When the Romans would put a body to rest, if they eyes of the dead person were closed, his or her relatives would call their name several times loudly. After being washed and anointed and dressed according to their social status, they would be surrounded by torches and candelabras as they lay upon the *lectus funebris* (funeral bed) (Cancik and Schneider, *Burial*). As the body lay there, there would be a time of somber mourning as the family and servants sang the lamentation of the dead. There would then be two funeral meals, one on the day of the burial called the *silicernium* (funeral feast) and the second was after the sacrifices

were made for the dead on the ninth day and it was called the *cena novemdialis* (the dinner of the ninth day). Also on the ninth day, aristocratic families would hold various funeral games.

On the other hand, during the Archaic Period, Etruscans funerals supported themes of joyfulness and celebration (Burancelli, *The Etruscans...*, 27). They considered the afterlife to be a happy experience, where the dead is able to progress from this life to a life of feasting, dancing, drinking, making love, hunting, and swimming. Many ancient tombs depict scenes of celebration and various festivities. There are dancers and musicians and happy couples lounging as they converse with spirited gestures. The women depicted in these paintings, who are wives of noble families, are freely partaking in merry celebration; this would have left the Greeks and Romans astonished, because this behavior was considered “scandalous.” According to Greek culture, women were courtesans, not wives, whose only purpose at drinking parties was to provide companionship; Roman matrons were similarly refined. Etruscan husband and wife relations were quite different. They were among the most liberated in ancient times and women shared an open, balanced relationship with their husband. In essence, Etruscan funerals celebrated the progression of the dead to a merrier life, while Roman funerals mourned the deceased and honored their legacy by preparing them according to their economic status and, in turn, for their afterlife.

Despite these established burial customs of the Romans and Etruscans, both traditions changed gradually over time. Ironically, the Etruscans began to submit to a

more somber, dark atmosphere at funerals and the Romans adopted Christianity in the 4th century CE and, therefore began to liven their funerals by singing Psalms instead of lamenting and offering gifts of oil (Cancik and Schneider, *Burial*). The Etruscan transformation began during the Hellenistic Period, which is where our ash urn is from. This was the period in which the Romans began to dominate Italy by siege (Buranelli, *The Etruscans...*, 28-29). The bright, hopeful scenes of the Archaic Period tombs now transformed to a gloomy underworld. The afterlife was still recognized, except now it was acknowledged through the depictions of demons and monsters. Sometimes tomb paintings portrayed the chambers of the Etruscan Hades, Aita. Our ash urn shows this transformation in the violent scene of two brothers killing each other and then being dragged off into the afterlife by two female demons. “The Roman historians paint a picture of Etruria in this period that is grim and gloomy...” (Buranelli, *The Etruscans...*, 28). The Romans had conquered the Etruscans and this feeling of defeat impacted Etruscan burial traditions, as well as the overall atmosphere of society.

We see this somber, disconsolate vibe, not only in our own ash urn, but also other ash urns that were from the same period. Greek mythology was a very common theme in ash urn depictions and during the Hellenistic period, battle scenes became prevalent (Haynes, *Etruscan Civilization...*, 341-342). A common theme was a portrayal of a hero—some speculate that it was Greek hero Echetlos—wielding a plowshare and fighting his armed opponents. These complex, interlocking battle scenes were another result of the impact of foreign trade, inspired by sculptures from Asia Minor, Rhodes,

and South Italy. Figure 1 (on the page 19), represents an ash urn with a noticeably similar theme as our ash urn. The deceased name, Thana Ancarui Helasa, is painted along the top. There is a closely-knit battle among five warriors. This scene has been found on a large number of other urns, indicating that this urn was mass-produced. The figure along the top is of a man, which presents a contradiction with the female name painted along the urn. The reason for this is probably because it was mixed up with similar pieces at the time of discover or there exceptional circumstances at the time of burial. This is also why we cannot conclude that the remains of the person inside of our ash urn is a male, even though the cover indicated that the occupant is male. Figure 2 is a chest of an ash urn with a relief of family framed by underworld demons. Aita is also present, emerging as a tall figure and wearing a fur cap. The scene is a troublesome one, as two snake-haired Furies with torches taunt the woman with the baby from behind. There is a figure hovering beside the arch under which the departing priest stands, almost as if he is waiting to replace any hope or peace. Because of the emotional and personal aspect of this scene, is speculated that this was probably specially made by the family, rather than mass-produced (Haynes, *Etruscan Civilization...*, 341-342). Figure 1 and Figure 2 allow us to get a broader sense of the despaired environment that took over Etruscan/Roman culture after the 4th century. Figures 3 and 4 represent ash urns that are nearly identical to ours. The depiction of Etokles and Polynieces is indistinguishable—the only differences are the Greek inscriptions and the figure of the deceased on top. This shows that our ash urn was mass-produced and the theme depicted on the side was a very common one.

Themes among different ossuaries were both similar and different from each other. Our ossuary has a depiction of vegetation between the two circles, while the one in Figure 5 has an arch with columns. This indicated that the occupant was probably from a very wealthy family or was of some great importance to society (Rahmani and Sussmann, *A Catalogue...*, 29-30). We see the same double circles, with meticulous designs all around the surface. There is no horror vacui, preserving the dignity of its designer; however, it is difficult to tell if there are incisions. There are two swirled designs springing out of the columned arch, but they are done quite tastefully so it is not clear whether they are incisions or if they were a part of the original design and created with tools. This ossuary is very similar to ours, but not all ossuaries had decoration. Figure 6 is an example of one of the few documented plain ossuaries. There were also ossuaries that were decorated on all of their sides; however, both fully decorated and plain ossuaries were not common (Rahmani and Sussmann, *A Catalogue...*, 25). The more decorated ossuaries were most expensive, while the plain ones were the cheapest. Rahmani states that “the choice of cheaper types should not be a sign of comparative poverty or of parsimony. (Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*)” For Jews, it was sometimes used for religious ethnical considerations; however, Romans did not hold such strong religious beliefs. Knowing this, I can’t help but consider that our ossuary holds the remains of a somewhat financially stable individual. If he or she was not wealthy, they were at least financially comfortable—perhaps middle class citizens. It is not as decorated as Figure 5, but it is also not plain like Figure 6; however, this is just a

personal speculation. The reason for plain ossuaries in Rome cannot be determined for sure.

Death and burial were such an involved part of ancient society that studying their methods of burial allows us an insight that no other artifact could. The physical characteristics of our ossuary and ash urn allow us to learn about the cultural progression and beliefs of the Etruscans and Romans. Undoubtedly, the Romans and Etruscans differed in their cultures and beliefs. They each had different reasons for their extravagant burials and funerals. The Romans dedicated much of their energy to ensuring that they will receive a proper burial by joining a burial club and establishing an impressive economic standing to assist them in the afterlife. The Etruscans, on the other hand, were religiously motivated and, at first, found funerals to be a joyous occasion where they celebrated the progression of the deceased into the afterlife. By studying our ash urn, we discover that these happy celebrations and bright depictions on tombs had taken a somber turn and the afterlife was perceived as much darker. Our ash urn indicates a reference to the violent battles going on at the time with the Etruscans internally, and against the Romans and the Romans began to take over their territory during the Hellenistic Period. Our ossuary also gives us insight to later burial customs during the 1st century BCE, as traditions evolved. Jews had religious reasons for the reburial, while the Romans' reasons are speculated among scholars today. Whether it is because of the need for space or to protect their ancestors from thieves who rob their tombs, there is no doubt that this was a regular tradition in Rome during this time. There may always be many

unanswered questions about these ancient civilizations; however, that only means that, as we continue to make discoveries about artifacts such as our ossuary and ash urn, we will only continue to be amazed as we use them to decipher the history of these ancient people. There will always be more to learn.

Figure 1:



Figure 2:



Figure 3:



Figure 4:



Figure 5:



Figure 6:



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