

Gods walking on the roof: the evolution of terracotta statuary in Archaic Etruscan architecture in light of the kings of Rome

Nancy A. Winter

In memory of Denys Haynes

One of many particular traits of Etruscan architectural embellishment that distinguishes Etruscan buildings most clearly from architecture in ancient Greece during the Archaic period is the presence of statues placed along the ridge of the roof. In Greek architecture, only temples received decorated roofs in the Archaic period, and statuary was primarily used in the pediment; in Etruscan architecture, decorated roofs appear on houses already in the second half of the 7th c. B.C.; from the beginning a focal point of the decoration is the ridge.

The tradition of decoration along the ridge has often been traced back to the Iron Age forefathers of the Etruscans, the Villanovans, who lived in huts with thatched roofs.¹ As we know from small models of these huts, used as cinerary urns, the thatch was held in place by wooden beams that crossed over the top of the roof and often were adorned with decorative elements. When tiled roofs were introduced into Central Italy shortly after the middle of the 7th c. B.C., funerary urns replicating contemporary architecture reflect the change in roofing, and demonstrate a continuity in decoration despite the change-over in medium from thatch to terracotta. An especially close correspondence occurs between a roof of a house model at Cerveteri and an actual acroterion, as these decorative elements are called, from Acquarossa near Viterbo.² Both should date around 620-600 B.C. and consist of flat plaques forming a broad double volute that fitted into a slot at the end of the ridge tile.

This use of symmetrically-arranged decorative elements based on floral motifs is echoed by the slightly later figural decoration that gradually becomes more sculptural in nature. The earlier double-volute acroterion at Acquarossa is succeeded by another that is larger in scale and carries a figural pattern of heraldic panthers (or leopards, given the obvious spots on their bodies) framed by two long-necked creatures, either horses or felines, that replace the double volutes.³ Other non-joining fragments indicate the presence of a Gorgon. Various reconstructions have been proposed.⁴ The design has been compared to a contemporary tomb-painting from the Tomb of the Panthers at Tarquinia, where a decapitated head identified as a Gorgon's (but which looks more like a lion's) sits below two heraldic felines. Comparison might also be made, however, with the central scene in the pediments of three contemporary temples built in c.580 B.C. in Rome, Syracuse, and on the island of Corfu. In all three instances, a central figure of a Gorgon is flanked by spotted felines. M. Mertens-Horn⁵ has suggested that these three temples were built by exiled members of the ruling family of Bacchiads from Corinth, who had moved to Central Italy, Syracuse and Corfu when they were overthrown by the Kypselids in 657 B.C. She believes that the Rome temple beneath the church of Sant'Omobono was built by

1 E. Rystedt, *Acquarossa IV. Early Etruscan akroteria from Acquarossa and Poggio Civitate (Murlo)* (Stockholm 1983) 159-64; P. Danner, "Die Dekoration auf First und Giebelschrägen in der archaischen Baukunst Mittelitaliens," in E. Rystedt, Ch. Wikander and Ö. Wikander (edd.), *Deliciae fictiles (1st int. conference 1990)* (Stockholm 1993) 93-94.

2 Rystedt (supra n.1) 23-24, AR 7 (AR III), figs. 6, 35, 63 and 69-71 (Cerveteri model).

3 Rystedt (supra n.1) fig. 34, AR VIII and AR IX.

4 E. Rystedt, "Additional notes on Early Etruscan akroteria," in R. D. De Puma and J. P. Small (edd.), *Murlo and the Etruscans* (Madison, WI 1994) 78-81, fig. 8.2; F. R. Serra Ridgway, "Oriental(izing) motifs in Etruscan art," *OpRom* 27 (2002) 118, fig. 4.

5 M. Mertens-Horn, "Corinto e l'Occidente nelle immagini. La nascita di Pegaso e la nascita di Afrodite," in *Corinto e l'Occidente* (AttiCSMG 34, Taranto 1994 [1995]) 257-89.