

From Grave Goods to Democratic Ownership, an Engraving of the Trebbia Tomb and the Hamilton Vase

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Abstract: This paper provides a case study of two objects, an ancient vase and an engraving illustrating the opening of an Etruscan tomb dating to the third century BCE. Both illustrate the reception of antiquity into the modern world and, in parallel, this essay contextualises them. Grave goods in the Trebbia Tomb date from circa 420 BCE while the Hamilton Vase was created some 75 years later. The creation of the artefacts and the nexus of trade and culture between the Greeks and Etruscans are examined. The means of accessing vases from antiquity in the eighteenth century CE is explored, whilst a detailed examination of the two artefacts demonstrates their symbiosis. It concludes by exploring the changing values ascribed to the Hamilton Vase and the Trebbia tomb through a 2,400 year period.

The art historian, Sir E.H. Gombrich (1901-2001) wrote that:

We cannot write the history of art without taking account of the changing functions assigned to the visual image in different societies and different cultures¹

This paper considers Gombrich's observation in relation to the two artefacts. It is multidisciplinary and, whilst retaining the focus on the two objects shown as Figures 1 and 2, it encompasses ancient technology, art history, religious belief, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the rise of the democratic museum.



Figure 1: (above) The engraving of the opening of an Etruscan tomb at Trebbia from d'Hancarville's "Antiquités étrusques, grecques et romaines" (1766–67). Photo: Author.

Figure 2: (right) The Hamilton Vase in the British Museum. Photo: Author .



¹ E.H.Gombrich quoted in T. Rasmussen and N. Spivey (Eds.) *Looking at Greek Vases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p.133.

There are interlocking characteristics between the two artefacts. The engraving illustrates the emptying of an ancient tomb while the Hamilton Vase is a product of such activity. Greek craftsmanship and Etruscan use of it demonstrate a syncretistic relationship between two cultures. It was Sir William Hamilton, Minister Plenipotentiary to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, 1764-1800,² who was responsible for making both artefacts known, and one of the first great vase collectors. The engraving romanticises the random removal of grave goods in this period, while the Hamilton Vase itself offers the viewer an opportunity to examine closely both skills of craftsmanship and the iconography of a magnificent South Italian vase. Both are illustrated in D'Hancarville's *Antiquités étrusques, grecques et romaines tirées du cabinet de M. Hamilton*, (AEGR), a work commissioned by Hamilton to publicise his vase collection. The influence of this work was enormous, consulted by contemporary European aristocrats and scholars. Personal failure to meet publication costs was a significant reason for Hamilton selling the entire first vase collection to the British Museum.

Along with hundreds of others, both the Trebbia Tomb (Figure 1) and the Hamilton Vase (Figure 2) were found in the Naples area in the early eighteenth century, a period before the modern discipline of archaeology was established. For example J.J. Winckelmann (1717-1768) pilloried R.J. Alcubierre, chief archaeologist for the Vesuvius area from 1738-1780, as being 'as familiar with antiquity as the moon is with lobsters'.³ Alcubierre was an army captain with a background in mining, and his methods involved the rapid removal of infilling material and the removal of artefacts without significant recording⁴. In parallel, there was clandestine anarchic robbing of thousands of Etruscan tombs. Such was the *milieu* from which the Trebbia tomb and Hamilton Vase emerged.



Figures 3,4,5: The cork model of the Trebbia Tomb illustrates (Figure 3) the shape of the tomb, (Figure 4) the grave goods (Figure 5) and the wall paintings inside the tomb. Photos: Author.

The Trebbia Tomb displays typical Etruscan features (Figure 1 and Figures 3, 4, 5). As an ethnic group they were easily distinguished by their language, unique written script and culture. To a degree Etruscan society was dominated by religion.⁵ Their gods communicated with them through natural events. Not unnaturally this led to a preoccupation with death and its consequences, rendering funerary customs matters of great significance. The living feared that, if denied funeral rites, the dead might become malevolent. Consequently, tombs were sturdily constructed so that the deceased might find comfort in their last dwelling and enjoy the afterlife. They were furnished and decorated with an array of grave goods. Vases are a common feature, frequently decorated with lively scenes.

² From a lower diplomatic rank, he was promoted to this position in 1767.

³ R. Etienne. *Pompeii, The Day a City Died* (London. Thames and Hudson, 1986) p. 146.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.146.

⁵ For further information on Etruscan religion see <http://www.mysteriousetruscans.com/religion.html>

Although absent from the Trebbia Tomb,⁶ sculpture is found in some Etruscan tombs as grave goods, sometimes depicting couples reclining at a symposium.⁷ Wall paintings helped to evoke a *joie de vivre* which, in terms of the Etruscan morbid obsession with death, appears curious⁸. Their culture assimilated aspects from the Italian Greek colonies. Homeric funeral rites were respected by them⁹, whilst their guardian of the underworld, the fearsome Charon is sometimes painted with a blue hue to evoke decomposing flesh.

Greek and Etruscan cultural intercourse was not fully understood in the eighteenth Century. The theory of a significant Greek influence met with hostility from the local population, aligned to the prevailing view of the Etruscans as an autochthonous civilisation from whom the Italians partially descended. It proved unsustainable. J.J. Winckelmann, author of the highly influential *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764)¹⁰ was in contact with Hamilton and viewed his collection of vases, including the Hamilton Vase. Subsequently he accepted that the 'Etruscan' vases were Greek in origin. As Figure 5 shows, the walls of Etruscan tombs were frequently painted. Hamilton observed:

The style of the paintings so closely corresponds to the figures on the vases that it cannot be doubted that they were executed by the same people as fabricated them and I have reason to believe that they were Greek and not Etruscan.¹¹

The Trebbia Tomb demonstrates Hamilton's enthusiasm for both excavation and collecting. Trebbia is in the mountains some ten miles above Capua. It took considerable stamina to reach the spot, located no doubt through local knowledge. D'Hancarville described it as being accessed by 'untrodden and toilsome paths'. It is an idyllic setting with the environment and secrecy of the enterprise engendering early romantic notions, even in the period of the Enlightenment. Once the tomb was opened, it was apparently sketched *in situ* by Hamilton, worked up professionally by Pietro Bracci, then engraved by Carlo Nolli for publication in *AEGR* (Vol.2). The engraving itself adds detail to Hamilton's field sketch, that would fit with the later Romantic movement. Figure 1 conjures a timeless, tranquil scene. Note the overhanging foliage, the solid masonry block leaning, as if for countless ages, against the tomb's side. The shaft of light penetrates 2200 years of darkness inside the tomb, revealing the mortal remains of an Etruscan notable.

Reality was different. Hamilton's labourers had hacked out the masonry block, doubtless with noise and mess. In consequence the crude insertion of the tree trunk was essential to prevent the collapse of the entire edifice. It is in keeping with the mores of the age that scenes should be 'improved'. The engraver has generated a timeless serenity. The British Museum has partially reconstructed the grave goods within the tomb from items included in Hamilton's first vase collection, using his sketch and the cork model. (Figures 4, 5, 6) Both items derive from the excavation itself.

The finely articulated skeleton was reduced to dust on exposure to the elements (Figure 1). Behind the head can just be discerned a fan of six metal rods and two candelabra, presumably items with religious significance. The grave goods ensure a pleasant afterlife. The strigil points to a healthy athletic life. A bronze wine strainer, the bell krater and the two handled ceramic jug are all associated with the symposium, good conversation and alcohol-

⁶ A sculpture showing a couple reclining in an Etruscan tomb.

<http://www.historyfiles.co.uk/KingListsEurope/ItalyEtruscans.htm>

⁷ The Hypogeum of the Volumnus family was discovered in 1830 and escaped the ravages of eighteenth century tomb robbers. Its contents are intact.

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d9/Hypogeum_cyark_3.jpg/240px-Hypogeum_cyark_3.jpg

⁸ A joyful afterlife? <http://fridaycenter.unc.edu/spcart151sec4/lesson07.htm>

⁹ Homer, *The Iliad*, Chapter 23.

¹⁰ D. Preziosi (Ed). *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford, OUP, 1998) pp 31-39.

¹¹ C. Lyons, 'Nola and the historiography of Greek Vases'. *Journal of the History of Collections*, Vol. 19. 2007 p..242.

fuelled entertainment with a hint of eroticism. Such artefacts and wall painting leads to the conclusion that the Etruscan after-life was perceived as lively.

Both the model and the engraving have aided modern vase scholars, who are now able to determine the geographical area in which a vase was created and, in many cases, to identify individual painters by their style. Using the Trebbia Tomb engraving and Hamilton's first collection, modern vase scholarship has given the red figure bell krater from the tomb a *terminus post quem* of 440-420 BCE (see below). It is attributed to the Lykaon Painter¹², active between 440-420 BCE. The krater is of Athenian provenance, not South Italian, and may have been produced specifically for the Etruscan market. This vase shows a symposium in progress, a common motif for Etruscan tombs. The walls of the Trebbia Tomb were painted in the style used by Greek artists in Magna Graecia. (See Figure 5)

There are contradictions within Hamilton. Tomb robbing was only one of the ways by which he acquired vases. Existing collections might be purchased. Antiquarian dealers held stocks of vases for sale. His collecting appetite was voracious. Undoubtedly he was a dealer in antiquities, even if an exalted one, but of himself he commented that 'I am delicate as to the manner of collecting as I should not like to be looked on as a trader'¹³ Again he showed himself sensitive to the consequences of the mass removal of artefacts from antiquity, an activity into which he wholeheartedly immersed himself commented 'I think Italy is in great danger of being completely plundered and ruined.'¹⁴

Even if the purchase of vases from existing collections and dealers was legitimate, there were laws in place that prevented their export. Hamilton seems not to have allowed legalities to thwart his collecting instinct. Within two years of his arrival he had secured a large vase collection. Such is the context in which the Hamilton Vase reappeared after 2,300 years of darkness.



Figure 6: Objects from the Trebbia Tomb in the British Museum. Photo: British Museum, with permission.

The focus now shifts to the Hamilton Vase itself which most probably emerged from an Etruscan tomb, now unknown. It is painted in the South Italian mode and decorated by the Baltimore Painter,¹⁵ so called because the painter's 'name vase' is in the Baltimore Museum.¹⁶

Working in about 325 BCE, most of his vases that have been discovered are from the Apulia district, near Canosa. He painted several large vessels often with funerary scenes (as with the Hamilton Vase). Some 90 centimetres tall, it has on one side a *naiskos*, (a small temple), with a figure inside it displayed as the heroic nude warrior, in this case a

¹² BM. GR. 1772.3. Beazley ARV. 1045.8.

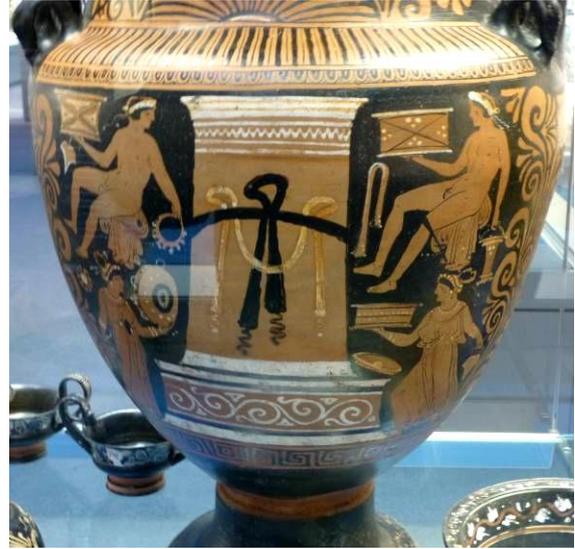
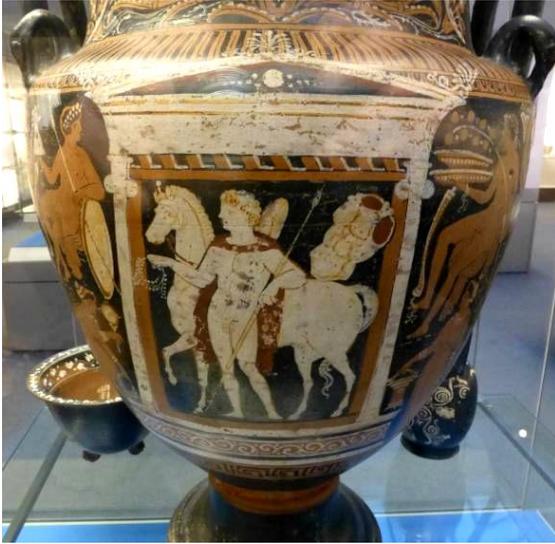
¹³ N. Ramage, 'Sir William Hamilton as Collector, Explorer and Dealer. The Acquisition and Dispersal of his Collection'. *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 94, No.3. July, 1990, p.472.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, P.478.

¹⁵ A. Trendall, *Red Figure Vases of South Italy and Sicily*. (London, Thames & Hudson, 1989) p. 97.

¹⁶ <http://art.thewalters.org/detail/30814/volute-krater/>

cavalryman. It is a Classical Greek trope. His armour rests behind his muscular form (Figure 7).



Figures 7 & 8: The Hamilton Vase. Figure 7 shows the front of the vase, Figure 8 the reverse. Photo: Author.

That the figure is white as distinct from the red of all others depicted may mark out the dead from the living. Architecturally, the *naiskos* is a Classical Greek structure with its Doric columns, pediment and acroteria. The horse behind the warrior is a declaration of status. The grave stele on the reverse (Figure 8) is an icon replicated frequently in both sculpture and art from the Greek mainland.¹⁷



Figure 9: Images within the volutes of the Hamilton Vase, perhaps giving it apotropaic power.

Some of the iconography is open to debate. What of the woman's head on the neck of the vase? (See Figure 1) South Italian Greek pottery has the 'lady of fashion' icon repeated *ad nauseam*. (See Figure 10). Perhaps it is nothing more than a stylistic notion. It is a common feature on many vases of this kind.

¹⁷ An image of a grave stele from an Athenian white ground lekythos. <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1989.281.72>.



Figure 10: The stereotypical ‘lady of fashion’ found on large numbers of South Italian vases. Photo: Pyxis from author’s collection.

In AEGR, the Hamilton Vase is lavishly displayed in a two-dimensional patterned format.¹⁸ There is also a black and white line drawing offering the viewer some concept of the original vase, together with exact measurements. The main illustrations of the vase transformed it into flat, two-dimensional patterns (Figures 11 and 12). It remains a thing of beauty but has become a different object. Now it is a pattern to be adapted wherever its design might be of use. The female face above the *naiskos* is given a huge four-sided spread (Figure 12). The printing technique gives the appearance of a heavy gouache overlay. It renders the face softer, while the hair colouring is changed from the original. Likewise, the foliage surrounding the head has been much simplified. Such ‘improvements’ were within the norm of eighteenth century practice.

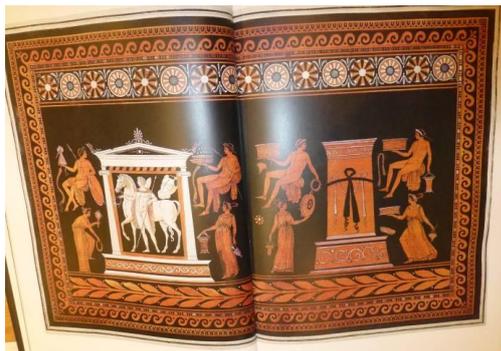


Figure 11: The Hamilton Vase extruded as a two dimensional object in Volume 1 of AEGR. Photo: Author.



Figure 12: The extruded, but altered, face on the neck of the Hamilton Vase in AEGR Volume 1. Photo: Author.

¹⁸ AEGR Vol 1. Plates 52-56.

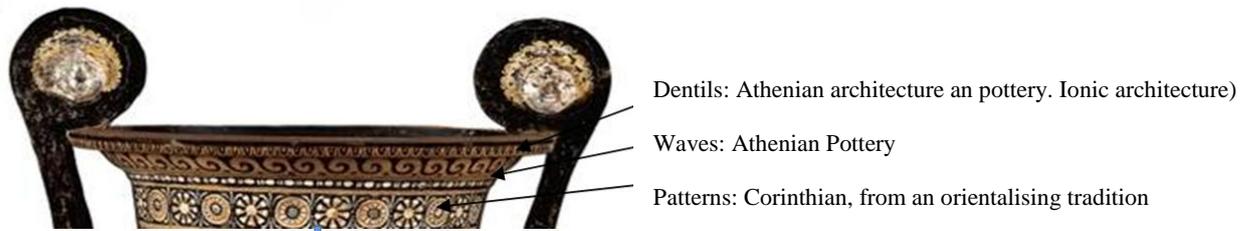


Figure 13: Elements derived from Greek originals in the Hamilton Vase.

In common with most South Italian vases, the Hamilton Vase shows a heavy dependence on the Athenian and Corinthian tradition of vase production.(Figure 13). The rim of the vessel illustrates this. The top frieze is of dentils, a design used in both pottery and sculpture. Below it, a row of waves is native to Athenian vase design. The third frieze is one of circular, almost floral designs, developed from the Corinthian tradition. The Hamilton Vase is covered with decoration, detracting from an overall elegance in some eyes, whereas the Athenian originals were far more sparing in detail allowing a greater focus on a central image.

Wedgwood cannot be ignored in this context. Long in communication with Hamilton whom he described as ‘legislator of taste’, he was thrilled with the imagery and design within AEGR, so appropriate to the age of classical revival. Many of his vase designs show dependence on it. Wedgwood knew the Hamilton vase, both in AEGR and as displayed in the British Museum.

Hamilton’s sale of his first vase collection to the British Museum in 1772, purchased for £8,400, through a Parliamentary grant, was the start of the Museum’s antiquities collection. Hamilton became a trustee of the Museum and was able to have the vase collection in well lit spaces and viewed at eye level. This was to be the final destination for both the Hamilton Vase¹⁹ and the cork model of the Trebbia Tomb.²⁰

The Trebbia tomb was built and furnished to please and appease the departed. Later, those revealing the tomb site to Hamilton were driven by financial motives. Hamilton then removed the grave goods, now considered aesthetically important. In the eighteenth century, apart from their wall paintings, the tombs themselves were seen as of little consequence. To contemporary Etruscan scholars, they are of the greatest value as primary evidence.²¹

Public perception of the Hamilton Vase has varied enormously over time. The Baltimore Painter of 325 BCE created it as yet another object for the Etruscan market. The motive was profit. Its purchasers gave it a sacred significance within a grave. Some 2100 years later it re-emerged through persons unknown, with financial gain as the likely motive. Once in Hamilton’s hands, its new role was as an object of aesthetic worth. Hamilton perceived the vase, *inter alia*, as exemplar material for design, where it became a two dimensional pattern in Volume 1 of AEGR.

After Hamilton’s collection was sold to the British Museum, the Hamilton Vase, the engraving in AEGR and the cork model of the Trebbia Tomb together with its actual contents, became objects belonging to the nation. The Museum has remained true to its

¹⁹ It is currently exhibited in BM, Room 73, ‘The Greeks in Italy’.

²⁰ It can be viewed in the Enlightenment Gallery of the BM.

²¹ http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/thumbs/site_1158_0001-464-0-20100120100928.jpg
http://www.mariamilani.com/ancient_civilisation_civilization/Etruscan_tomb_reliefs_lrg.jpg

founding objective in 1759, of making cultural material open to ‘All persons desirous of seeing and viewing the collections and for the improvement, knowledge and information of all persons.’²² The artefacts considered continue to be available, free of charge, to all who wish to view and consider their meaning.

This paper has identified the two artefacts as having been given six separate perceptions by different generations over a 2400 period. They illuminate Gombrich’s contention that artefacts change value according to the mores of those considering them, raising the question of whether human values can ever be absolute.

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²² K. Sloan (Ed). *Enlightenment, Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*. London, British Museum Press. P.14.

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