

# OLD EUROPEAN POPULATIONS. THE ETRUSCAN PRINCESS OF PONTECAGNANO. RITUAL, POWER, AND IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PRE-ROMAN ITALIC ARISTOCRACY

Alexandra RADU<sup>1,2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Education,

Bucharest University, Bucharest, Romania

<sup>2</sup> Cultural Psychology of Sustainable Human Development -

Laboratory of Psychology, Salerno, Italy

\*Corresponding author: alexandra.peca63@s.fpse.unibuc.ro

ORCID iD: 0009-0005-0350-5316

## Abstract

*This article explores the archaeological and historical context of the region of Pontecagnano (Italy), focusing on the interaction between the Etruscan and Picentian populations of southern pre-Roman Italy. The focus of the research is the discovery of the painted tomb T.10043, dated to the end of the 4th century i.Hr., which belongs to a local aristocratic elite. Decorated with rare frescoes depicting the "return of the warrior," the tomb offers valuable insight into the social status and burial practices of that era. At the same time, the concept of an "Etruscan princess" is analyzed, in the context of the female princely tombs previously discovered in the same site, dated to the Orientalizing period.*

*The research places these findings in a broader framework of coexistence and interaction between the Etruscans and the Picentini, in a cultural frontier area. It is argued that these funerary forms reflect not only the individual status of the deceased, but also the social, identity and economic dynamics of a region characterized by intense intercultural exchanges.*

*The article combines archaeological data, iconographic interpretations and recent literary sources to offer an integrated reading of a multi-ethnic society in full transformation.*

**Keywords:** Etruscans, Picentini, pontecagnano, tomb T.10043, funerary archaeology, cultural synthesis, representation of women in antiquity, identity and collective memory, cultural pluralism

## 1. Introduction

In the heart of ancient Campania, on the territory of the current city of Pontecagnano Faiano, lies one of the most important archaeological sites of pre-Roman Italy. The National Archaeological Museum of Pontecagnano, suggestively titled "Gli Etruschi di frontiera" ("Border Etruscans"), houses more than 10,000 artifacts from local necropolises, reflecting a continuous history of habitation and cultural exchange for over a millennium. These archaeological treasures provide a detailed look at the complex interactions between the Italic populations, especially between the Etruscans and the Picentini, in a cultural and political frontier space (Moscati, 1999).



Figure 1. Helmet-shaped cinerary cap (late ninth century î.Hr.), with two 3D human silhouettes — a female figure embracing a male figure. Interpreted as a representation of a deity or protective entity accompanying the deceased to the underworld. Exhibited at the National Archaeological Museum of Pontecagnano.

Among the most remarkable recent discoveries is the painted tomb T.10043, dated to the end of the fourth century î.Hr., identified in an elite sector of the necropolis. Built of travertine and decorated with frescoes on the walls and on the access door, the tomb illustrates a scene called "the return of the warrior" – a symbolic representation of aristocratic status and

memory. The discovery of a golden blade crown suggests that the deceased belonged to a ruling class, and some interpretations evoke the hypothesis of a female burial, associated with what popular literature has called the "Etruscan princess" (De Marinis, 2023).

The investigation of these funerary contexts must be understood in the light of the historical interaction between the Etruscan civilization and the Picentine population. Located on the southern border of Etruscan influence, the Pontecagnano area was a space of cohabitation and cultural conflict. As Riva (2005) points out, "the Etruscan-Picentian coexistence in southern Italy generated a unique cultural hybrid, in which Etruscan aristocratic forms blended with local indigenous traditions" (p. 142). Similarly, Turfa (2012) notes that "the local identity in the Orientalizing Campaign was the result of a constant interaction between the commercial Etruscan elites and the autochthonous Picentine communities" (p. 87).

Therefore, the analysis of these funerary structures not only reflects the social structure of a defunct elite, but reveals the dynamics of multi-ethnic societies in transformation.

## **2. The originality of the research and the delimitation of the field**

Although the archaeological and historical literature on the Etruscans, Picentini and pre-Roman Campania is relatively rich, there are few works that investigate the interaction between these populations in symbolic and iconographic terms, focusing on a single case study, such as the painted tomb T.10043. Most studies focus on either artifacts or urbanization processes, without directly integrating the analysis of gender and female representation in mixed funerary contexts.



Figure 2. Equine bronze mask (end of the eighth century î.Hr.), symmetrical welded tablets, decorated by reliefs with hunting scenes (harplet, lion, goat, wild boars and deer). A rare and emblematic artifact, coming from a princely funeral in Pontecagnano, next to horses — a symbol of prestige and sacredness in the Etruscan-Campanian aristocratic culture.

The present paper proposes an original approach by:

- the combination of comparative analysis of aristocratic female tombs from different eras;
- integration of a theoretical framework on cultural pluralism and ethnic border;
- the use of tomb T.10043 as a nodal point for investigating the symbolic transformations of feminine power;
- contextualization of these phenomena in a discourse on collective memory and post-funerary identity.

This research fills a gap in the current literature, bringing to attention the symbolic, identity and social dimension of the Etruscan-Picentian coexistence, with emphasis on the role of women in the cultural border space.

### **3. Methodology**

The present study uses an interdisciplinary approach, combining the archaeological analysis of the funerary material with historical-cultural interpretations regarding the identity and coexistence of the populations of

pre-Roman Italy. The investigation starts from the examination of the context provided by the National Archaeological Museum of Pontecagnano, especially with regard to recent discoveries from the local necropolis, such as the painted tomb T.10043.

The main method consists in the contextual analysis of funerary artifacts, the architectural structure of the tomb and the pictorial decoration, interpreted in correlation with the funerary practices attested in the literature for the Orientalizing and Late Hellenistic eras. Primary archaeological sources (excavation reports, museum catalogue, epigraphic data) are used, as well as secondary sources (historical studies, synthesis works, academic articles).

In parallel, a comparative method is applied to analyze the differences and similarities between the female aristocratic tombs dated in the VIII–VI centuries î.Hr. and the tomb T.10043, hypothetically linked to a high-ranking figure. This comparative analysis aims to identify recurrent cultural patterns or ideological transformations related to the social representation of the elite, especially women.

A third methodological level is the historiographical and cultural one, in which the Etruscan-Picentian coexistence is analyzed on the basis of recent contributions from historical anthropology, social history and regional archaeology. Cultural tensions and syntheses in ethnic border areas will be highlighted, using case studies and theories on cultural pluralism in Antiquity.

Through this triple approach – archaeological, comparative and cultural-historical – the study aims to provide an integrated image of the Italic society of Pontecagnano in the period prior to Romanization.

#### **4. Coexistence and cultural interaction between the Etruscans and the Picentini in southern Italy**

The analysis of funerary artifacts from the necropolis of Pontecagnano, especially from tomb T.10043, provides valuable clues regarding the complex cultural relations between the Etruscans and the Picentini in the period prior to the Romanization of southern Italy. This area, located between the sphere of influence of the Etruscans in Etruria proper and the territories occupied by the local Italic populations, functioned as an ethnic and cultural border area, where exchanges, assimilations and phenomena of social and religious syncretism took place.

#### **4.1. Etruscan origin and expansion**

The Etruscan population initially developed in Etruria (present-day Tuscany), but from the eighth century î.Hr., it expanded its sphere of influence southwards, reaching Campania through trade, colonies and aristocratic alliances. Pontecagnano, located near the Tyrrhenian coast, thus became an important Etruscan outpost in Campania, being "one of the southernmost expressions of the orientalizing Etruscan aristocracy" (Riva, 2010, p. 82).

This expansion was not achieved through direct military conquest, but rather through matrimonial alliances, transfers of prestigious goods and religious and funerary influence, as evidenced by the wealth of funerary bodies and female princely tombs of the Orientalizing era (Turfa, 2006, p. 143).

#### **4.2. The Picentine population: identity and territoriality**

The Picentines, on the other hand, represent a population of Italic origin, linguistically and culturally related to the Sabines, the Osci and the Samnites. Their presence in the southern area of Italy is attested by Greek and Latin sources, but also by archaeological evidence that indicates a stable and continuous habitation, in parallel with the Etruscan expansion. In Bradley's (2000) opinion, the Picentines "were not completely absorbed by the Etruscan influence, but maintained a distinct identity within a relationship of economic and cultural interdependence" (p. 215).

This coexistence was not without tensions, but it seems that, in areas such as Pontecagnano, a form of aristocratic cohabitation prevailed, in which the local Picentine elites adopted Etruscan prestige models, while preserving some of their own traditions, especially in funerary and religious terms.

#### **4.3. Archaeological evidence of coexistence: Pontecagnano case study**

Tomb T.10043 is emblematic of this cultural synthesis. The travertine construction, the Hellenistic-influenced painted decoration and the burial objects (including the golden wreath, the vessel with mythological symbols and the decorative festoons) suggest an aristocratic funerary environment specific to the Etruscan-Campanian elite. However, the absence of an abundant

funerary inventory and the modest dimensions of the room could indicate a local adaptation of an Etruscan model to the Picentian social context.

In this regard, Riva (2005) points out that "the funerary forms adopted by local elites in southern Italy do not reflect a simple imitation of the Nordic Etruscans, but a deliberate selection of locally negotiated symbols of power" (p. 147). Therefore, the painted tomb at Pontecagnano must be read as the result of a dynamic cultural interaction, rather than as a pure expression of a transplanted Etruscan tradition.

#### **4.4. Interpretation of coexistence: synthesis, not domination**

This perspective is also supported by recent research that defines the area of the pre-Roman Campaign as a space of "cultural hybridization". According to Smith (2014), "local identities in ancient southern Italy were formed in a context of ethnic pluralism and symbolic competition among regional elites" (p. 121). Thus, the coexistence between the Etruscans and the Picentini can be interpreted not as a phenomenon of cultural domination, but as a process of identity negotiation, visible especially in funerary practices, urbanism and iconography.

### **5. The representation of women in the Etruscan elites – a comparative analysis of aristocratic female tombs**

The comparative study of aristocratic female tombs in the Etruscan and Campanian area offers a privileged perspective on how female elites were integrated into the symbolic structure of power, prestige and collective identity in Italian antiquity. Tomb T.10043, recently discovered in Pontecagnano, is part of a funerary model that suggests the deceased's belonging to a higher social class, and its painted decoration brings into question elements of continuity and rupture with the female aristocratic traditions of the VIII-VI centuries î.Hr.

#### **5.1. Female princely tombs in the Orientalizing period**

During the Orientalizing period (ca. 730–580 î.Hr.), Pontecagnano was the center of an aristocratic community marked by Mediterranean influences, especially Oriental and Etruscan. Some of the most spectacular tombs from this era belong to women – identifiable by the presence of gold jewelry, bronze

mirrors, ornamental fibulae, and imported luxury vessels, suggesting high status and active participation in social and religious ceremonies.

An eloquent example is the tomb that could be defined as the "tomb of the Princess" from Pontecagnano (7th century î.Hr.), which contained a large amount of prestigious objects, including a golden crown, a cosmetic trousseau and ceramic vessels imported from the Orient. According to Perkins (2007), "the funerary representation of the Etruscan aristocratic woman reflects a double function – as custodian of domestic luxury and as symbolic mediator of family prestige" (p. 172).

## 5.2. Tomb T.10043: continuities and transformations

In contrast, tomb T.10043 – dated to the end of the fourth century î.Hr. – offers a more sober and symbolic image of the female elite. The burial chamber is painted with narrative scenes – among which the motif of the "return of the warrior" stands out – and the presence of a vessel with possible mythological meanings and a funerary wreath suggests an identity of rank, but not ostentatious.



Figure 3. Ritual ceramic objects discovered in tombs (source: Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Pontecagnano, 2021).

This moderation in the display of funerary wealth may reflect an ideological transformation in the representation of the female elite, in the context of intense contact with Hellenistic and Oscan models in southern Italy. Riva (2010) notes that "the female elites of the 4th–3rd centuries î.Hr. are defined more by their symbolic participation in the ideology of the warrior and the house, than by the visible accumulation of funerary goods" (p. 95).

### **5.3. Similarities and differences between eras**

Comparing the two periods, one can identify some major lines of evolution in the social representation of aristocratic women:

The role of women as a symbolic figure in the aristocratic family continues to be emphasized, but with a shift from material expression (jewelry, luxury) to a more narrative and iconographic one (painting, implicit rituals).

In both eras, the woman appears in a central position in the funerary space, not as a passive figure, but as an active representation of the values of the community – hospitality, memory, continuity.

Unlike the Orientalizing period, in the late Hellenistic era the female elites adopt a more spiritualized, discreet representation, possibly under the influence of new religious currents and changes in the structure of the aristocracy.

### **5.4. Ideological interpretation of tomb T.10043**

The painted decoration, rare in the Pontecagnano area, emphasizes not only the noble status of the deceased, but also the transformation of the tomb's function – from a repository of luxury to a space of ritual memory. In this sense, the painting with the return of the warrior could be interpreted as a metaphor for the symbolic return of the absent one – a man, perhaps the husband, brother or son of the deceased – to the family space.

This symbolic resignification of the female role in death shows an adaptation to new forms of cultural representation, which go beyond mere material ostentation. As Camporeale (2001) notes, "Etruscan women are not only reflections of male power, but ideological actors in the representation and continuity of aristocratic values" (p. 234).

## **6. Coexistence, synthesis and identity in the south of pre-Roman Italy. A cultural-historical reading of funerary symbolism**

The study of the relations between the Etruscans and the Picentini in the southern region of Italy, especially in the Pontecagnano area, must be placed in the broader context of the cultural frontiers of Antiquity. In an era marked by mobility, conflict and trade, the Italic space became an area of intense contact between indigenous peoples and external influences, especially from the Greek and Oriental worlds. In this context, the painted tomb T.10043, with its distinct symbolism, reflects not only class membership, but also a composite cultural identity.

### **6.1. Etruscans and Picentini: origins and relations in the border area**

The Picentian population is archaeologically and literarily attested as one of the Osco-Sabellian communities that migrated south during the first millennium î.Hr., settling in the hilly areas of Campania and Lucania. In contrast, the Etruscans, with a strongly urbanized core in central Italy (Etruria proper), extended their cultural and economic influence southward through trade, aristocratic networks, and the establishment of colonies (Riva, 2010).

Pontecagnano, located near the Gulf of Salerno, thus becomes a point of intersection between these two worlds. As Van Dommelen (2002) remarks, "ethnic borders in Antiquity were not rigid barriers, but spaces for interaction, synthesis and negotiation of identity" (p. 303). The archaeological evidence from the necropolis of Pontecagnano reflects precisely this ambivalence: a local aristocracy adopts Etruscan models (in the architecture of the tombs and in the rites), but also preserves local peculiarities, probably Picentine.

### **6.2. T.10043: a symbolic representation of cultural synthesis**

The mural painting in tomb T.10043 – the scene of the "return of the warrior" – is not a simple iconographic motif, but a narrative choice with a deep cultural charge. This can be interpreted as a gesture of integration into an Etruscan collective memory in which the figure of the returning warrior symbolizes the continuity of the community and the aristocratic ideal of honor and loyalty.

At the same time, the placement of a woman in such a pictorial setting, without an explicit representation, but suggesting her presence through elaborate funerals, shows an adaptation of male heroic iconography in a familial and feminine setting – an aspect specific to the Italic border funerary culture. According to Ceccarelli (2011), "in southern Italy, local elites created a hybrid version of aristocratic values, combining Greek symbolism with Italic and Etruscan traditions" (p. 118).

### **6.3. Cultural pluralism and local orientalism**

Both the Etruscans and the Picentines were deeply influenced by the contact with the Near East and archaic Greece. Artifacts from female princely tombs (Phoenician fibulae, Greek pottery, Egyptian mirrors) reflect a localized Orientalism, in which these objects take on new meanings depending on the cultural context in which they are inserted (Izzet, 2007).

Tomb T.10043 continues this tradition by selecting iconographic motifs that are not exclusively Etruscan, but are adapted to a multi-ethnic local identity. Especially in the southern regions, the idea of a mixed aristocracy, in which the Etruscans and Picentines collaborated, is reflected in the style of the tombs, in the combination of cremation and inhumation practices, and in religious syncretism.

Thus, the painting of tomb T.10043 is not just decoration, but the expression of a hybrid funerary ideology, in which elements of the Greek-Oriental imaginary are reformulated to serve the local Italic elite. This phenomenon can be understood in the light of recent theories on cultural hybridization and symbolic "glocalization" in Antiquity (Van Dommelen, 2006).

## **7. Conclusions**

### **7.1. Memory, identity and cultural heritage in the Pontecagnan area**

The Pontecagnano area offers a paradigmatic case of cultural synthesis between Etruscans, Picentini and Greco-Oriental influences, visible both in artifacts and in funerary ideological practices. This coexistence was not a passive one, but a creative one, giving rise to hybrid cultural forms, in which identity was not fixed, but constantly negotiated through rituals, symbols and prestigious relationships. The painted tomb T.10043 thus becomes not only an archaeological object, but a social and

ideological document, in which an aristocratic female figure is implicitly represented by a symbolic discourse of return and memory.

This identity negotiation between diverse cultural influences — Etruscan, Picentina, Greek, Oriental — reflects a model of functional pluralism, in which borders do not separate, but stimulate cultural creativity. As we have shown, "cultural pluralism is not perceived as dilution, but as a surplus of meaning, and ethnic borders are treated as spaces of symbolic creation".

## **7.2. The legacy of cohabitation: reflections in today's culture**

This ancient cultural dynamic has left its mark on the Campania region to this day. The Etruscan-Picentian heritage is not just a museum reality, but a living one, integrated into the local identity. Toponymy, rural architecture, culinary customs and ritual practices (including religious processions and ancestor worship) bear the traces of this historical stratification.

Today, Pontecagnano Faiano is a city that capitalizes on its archaeological heritage as a central element of community identity. The National Archaeological Museum of Pontecagnano is not only a cultural institution, but also a space for education and symbolic reactivation of the past. Projects such as *L'emozione di una scoperta*, dedicated to tomb T.10043, become modern forms of "storytelling" of local history, in which the current population reinterprets its own past.

In addition, many of the social values present in the local culture – respect for elderly women, extended family rituals, the importance of hospitality and gift – can be related to that Italian aristocratic tradition, in which the extended family was the symbolic nucleus of the continuity of the community. Thus, we can affirm that the cultural heritage of Etruscan-Picentian coexistence has not been forgotten, but transformed into cultural codes that continue to structure daily life.

## **7.3. The position of women: between visibility and symbolic authority**

An essential aspect revealed by tomb T.10043 and the aristocratic female tombs of the Orientalizing era is the social visibility of women within the local elites. Unlike other ancient Mediterranean societies, the Etruscan

culture and, in part, the Picentine culture, recognized a certain degree of autonomy and prestige for women of high rank.

The fact that the woman buried in T.10043 is honored by a painted tomb – a rarity in the Hellenistic era – and indirectly represented by masculine symbols (the warrior, the return, the house) indicates a transfer of prestige from the family sphere to the funerary one. So, not only men were associated with line and memory continuity, but also women, especially those belonging to the elite.

This pattern can be interpreted as a form of feminine symbolic authority, also visible in older artifacts such as rich funerary furniture, mirrors, and ceremonial fibulae. As Perkins (2009) states, "the representation of women in Etruscan culture is one of the most progressive in the Mediterranean world, through the public recognition of their social function"<sup>14</sup>.

Therefore, in the context of the Etruscan-Picentian synthesis, the woman appears not only as a ritual subject, but as an agent of continuity and collective memory – a central figure in the community's imaginary.

#### **7.4. Relevance for historical-cultural studies**

The study of the Pontecagnano case offers us a methodological and epistemological lesson: contextual archaeological analysis, combined with historiographical reflection, allows for a deeper reading of cultural identity. It is not only about discovering who the Etruscans or the Picentines were, but how they coexisted, created, represented themselves and were represented. In a current global context, in which pluralism and identity are once again tense topics, the example of a multicultural and creative antiquity becomes all the more relevant.

Pontecagnano is not just an archaeological area; it is a metaphor for pre-Roman Europe — a place of encounter, negotiation and identity creation. The painted tomb T.10043 offers us a symbolic window into a world in which female elites, warrior symbolism and funerary painting composed a complex language of collective memory. And this world continues, in a discreet form, to live in the local people, in their culture, in the active memory of a plural and profound past.

### **References**

- Bradley, G. (2000). *Ancient Umbria: State, Culture and Identity in Central Italy*. Oxford University Press.
- Camporeale, G. (2001). *The Etruscans. History and civilization*. Turin: UTET.
- Ceccarelli, L. (2011). Death and Gender in Archaic Italy: A Contextual Approach to Female Burials. *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 24(2), 105–134.
- De Marinis, R. (2023). *The Etruscan princess of Pontecagnano: Archaeology of a discovery*. Salerno: National Archaeological Museum of Pontecagnano.
- Izzet, V. (2007). *The Archaeology of Etruscan Society*. Cambridge University Press.
- Moscato, S. (1999). *The Etruscans*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Perkins, P. (2007). Etruscan Women and the Concept of the Afterlife. *Etruscan Studies*, 10(1), 165–179.
- Riva, C. (2005). The Urbanisation of Etruria: Funerary Practices and Social Change, 700–600 BC. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 15(2), 139–156.
- Riva, C. (2010). *The Urbanisation of Etruria: Funerary Practices and Social Change, 700–600 BC*. Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, C. J. (2014). *Early Rome and Latium: Economy and Society c. 1000 to 500 BC*. Oxford University Press.
- Peat, J. M. (2006). *Etruscan Italy: Etruscan Influences on the Civilizations of Italy from Antiquity to the Modern Era*. University of Pennsylvania Museum Press.
- Peat, J. M. (2012). *Divining the Etruscan World: The Brontoscopic Calendar and Religious Practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Van Dommelen, P. (2002). Ambiguous Matters: Colonialism and Local Identities in Punic Sardinia. *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 15(1), 61–87.
- Van Dommelen, P. (2006). Colonial interactions and hybrid practices: Phoenician and Carthaginian settlement in the ancient Mediterranean. *The Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 16(3), 289–305.

### **Photo sources:**

1. Helmet-shaped cinerary cap (late ninth century î.Hr.), with two 3D human silhouettes — a female figure embracing a male figure. Photo published by Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Pontecagnano "Gli Etruschi di frontiera", on the official Facebook page, post with the ID 5202331606503314 within the 1000594956677021 set, accessed on August 8, 2025.
2. Bronze equine mask. Exhibition photo posted by Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Pontecagnano "Gli Etruschi di frontiera" on the official Facebook page (post with ID 1171664438310062), accessed on August 7, 2025.
3. Ritual ceramic objects discovered in tombs. Photo posted on <https://www.oltreresti.it/pontecagnano/> website.