

# Beyond the banquet: food, social status and territorial control in South Etruria (fourth century BC)<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** While the visual representation of Etruscan banquets has long been a prominent subject of study, the iconographical changes that occurred between the late Archaic (Classical) and Hellenistic periods have not been appreciated in their full historical significance yet. Based on a select group of South Etruscan tomb paintings, this chapter sets out by pointing to marked innovations that occurred in the representation of food and human interaction therewith from the early fourth century BC. While wine consumption continued to be a central theme of elite interaction, it was considerably less pronounced than in the iconography of the preceding period. At the same time, the depiction of specific foodstuffs in banqueting scenes constituted a novelty, as did the representation of food preparation and its practitioners. The concluding discussion explains these changes in funerary iconography as linked to a new type of social esteem that was associated with food production and consumption, as well as with territorial control.

**Keywords** South Etruria, tomb painting, social history, food, agriculture

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## Introduction

Over the last two decades, archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological approaches to Etruscan diets have slowly but increasingly become firmly established<sup>2</sup>. As a result, it is abundantly clear that the foodstuffs represented in elite visual culture, let alone the stereotypical *truphē* that was scathingly discussed by Greek authors, were by no means the norm in Etruscan society<sup>3</sup>. As a corollary of these insights, therefore, it is timely to discuss again and in a new light the social ideals on which such representa-

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1 It is both an honour and a pleasure to dedicate this article to my friend and colleague Günther Schörner, an aficionado of both central Italy and its outstanding cuisines. I furthermore ought to express my gratitude to the editors for inviting me to contribute to this inspired project, and to Martin Bentz for generously allowing me to work in the library of the Abteilung für Klassische Archäologie of the Bonn University. Daria Lanzuolo (DAI Rome) and Laura Michetti (Sapienza) kindly assisted me with procuring the illustrations.

2 Most recently, see Shriver-Rice – Schmidt 2022, as well as the useful overview by Colivicchi 2016.

3 Cf. Liébert 2006.

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tions can in fact shed some light, taking two well-known fourth-century tomb paintings from South Etruria as my points of departure. These are the recently restored Tomb of the Shields at Tarquinia and the Tomba Golini I in the rural surroundings of Orvieto-Volsinii respectively<sup>4</sup>. Both paintings provide striking examples of the detailed representation of food in the context of elite funerals, an innovative choice of motif that contrasts with the strong emphasis on wine and its correct consumption according to the conventions shared by the elites of the preceding Archaic period. In addition, the Tomba Golini I is unique among surviving paintings, owing to the scenes of food being prepared and served, juxtaposed with other, less well-preserved sections that show the elaborate elite banquet at which these very dishes were consumed.

I begin this chapter with a brief description of the relevant motifs that are found in the two tombs under discussion. Next, I make a case for using these paintings as sources for social history, specifically in relation to elite ideology, as opposed to other possible approaches that place them primarily in the realm of eschatology. In my discussion, I point out possible avenues towards linking the study of these and other types of elite material with the history of food production and consumption in Etruria and central Italy more widely. Since the available space for this contribution is limited, my observations are preliminary and will be followed up in greater detail elsewhere.

### **Food, cooking and feasting in tomb paintings**

The early Hellenistic or late Classical period of Etruscan tomb painting (c. 400 to 325) saw notable developments in the genre, in respect of both innovative techniques and choices of motif. Although my focus here concerns the latter, these two categories should not strictly be separated since it was only through artistic innovation that the intended, clear representation of certain details could be realised. One of the most striking developments in the choice of motifs concerns the introduction of food as a focal point of banqueting scenes. By contrast, the numerous depictions of elite conviviality of the Archaic and early Classical periods (down to the last decades of the fifth century BC) were primarily concerned with wine-drinking, including the detailed representation of specialised services of ceramic and metal vessels.

At least three known examples of fourth century tomb paintings contained detailed depictions of food within banqueting scenes, one of which (the back wall in the Tomba del Triclinio at Cerveteri) survives only in Canina's somewhat unreliable drawings and is not discussed in detail for this reason here<sup>5</sup>. The other two are from Tarquinia (Tomba degli Scudi, Primi Arci necropolis) and the outskirts of Orvieto-Volsinii (Tomba Golini I, *loc.* Poggio del Roccolo di Settecamini) and form the basis of

4 Steingraber 1985, no. 32. 109. All dates are BC, unless otherwise stated.

5 Steingraber 1985, no. 11 figs. 15–16; cf. also Steingraber 2006, 213. Yet the example serves to show that we are dealing with a phenomenon that was not limited to just one or two South Etruscan cities.

the present discussion. Although all three paintings contain references to the underworld, we should be careful not to overemphasise the eschatological dimension of their messages<sup>6</sup>. Rather, I focus on the funerary record as creating idealised representations of the social world of the living<sup>7</sup>. Even if the period under discussion saw an increasing intrusion of references to death and, possibly, eschatology, real-life motifs such as banqueting continued essentially to represent social practices that clearly had an important place in aristocratic life. Therefore, significant changes to how such practices were depicted most probably pointed to shifts not only in their idealised form but moreover in the aspects of banqueting which were deemed particularly important in elite circles. Viewed in this light, the novelties of detailed depictions of food and its preparation are deserving of further scrutiny.

Dating to the third quarter of the fourth century, the paintings inside the Tomba Golini I, part of a tomb complex that was owned by the *Leinie* family, are exceptional in their composition that combines detailed scenes of food preparation (butchery, cooking, baking) and service with an elaborate banqueting scene (Figs 1–4)<sup>8</sup>. The presence of underworld gods at the meal, while significant, should not outweigh the fact that this is in the first place a representation of an idealised banquet attended by the family's most illustrious ancestors whose achievements in public life are given by accompanying inscriptions (cf. my discussion of these *elogia* below). A partitioning wall that runs up half-way from the back (far) wall towards the entrance visually divides the burial chamber into two halves: while the left of these depicts food preparation and service, the right is given to scenes of banqueting<sup>9</sup>. In both halves, food is represented at a striking level of detail. From left to right, the preparation scenes are opened by the representation of animal carcasses in a butchery setting on the left half of the entrance wall: the headless carcass of an ox is suspended from a beam by a rope, with the slaughtered animal's severed head lying on the floor next to it on the right. Adjacent to this ensemble, we see the carcasses of several game birds (pigeons, ducks or wild geese), a hare and a roe deer hanging from a high rack.

The scene continues seamlessly on the left chamber-wall, starting with an axe-wielding butcher at work: like most of the other servants in the scene, this figure is accompanied by an inscription that might denote his specific *metier* and/or status within the household<sup>10</sup>. To his right, male servants (depicted nude apart from their loincloths)

6 Cf. Steingraber 2006, 189–191, who places the banqueting scenes in the underworld.

7 In general, see d'Agostino 1985. Specifically, I am sympathetic to Hölscher's (2021) reading of the dining scenes in the Tomba del Tuffatore at Paestum, as well as to his wider observations pertaining to the significance of banqueting and social life in the context of funerary iconography.

8 Pairault-Massa 1983; Pizzirani 2014. Steingraber 1985, 287 figs. 43–44 provides complete illustrations of the paintings in the sequence in which they are discussed here. Further illustrations of specific scenes are reproduced in Steingraber 1985, pl. 3–6; Steingraber 2006, 211–213, 225–227.

9 For the tomb chamber's plan, see Steingraber 1985, 350 (no. 82); Steingraber 2006, 309 (no. 82). The significance of the *faux* partitioning wall and its iconography is addressed in detail by Pizzirani 2014.

10 Cf. Pairault-Massa 1983, 21–26, and, for a different take, Pizzirani 2014, 64–66.

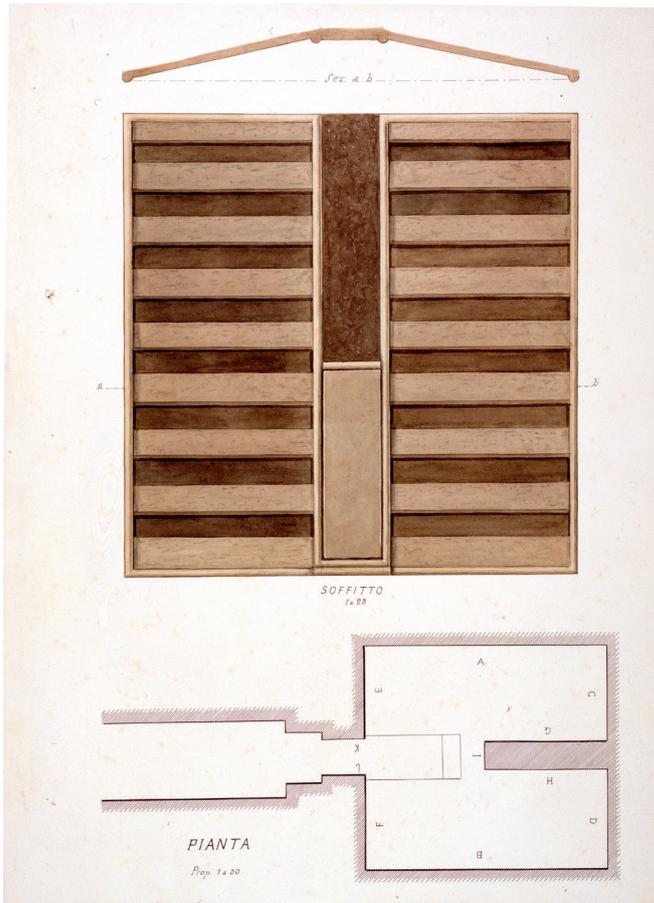


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

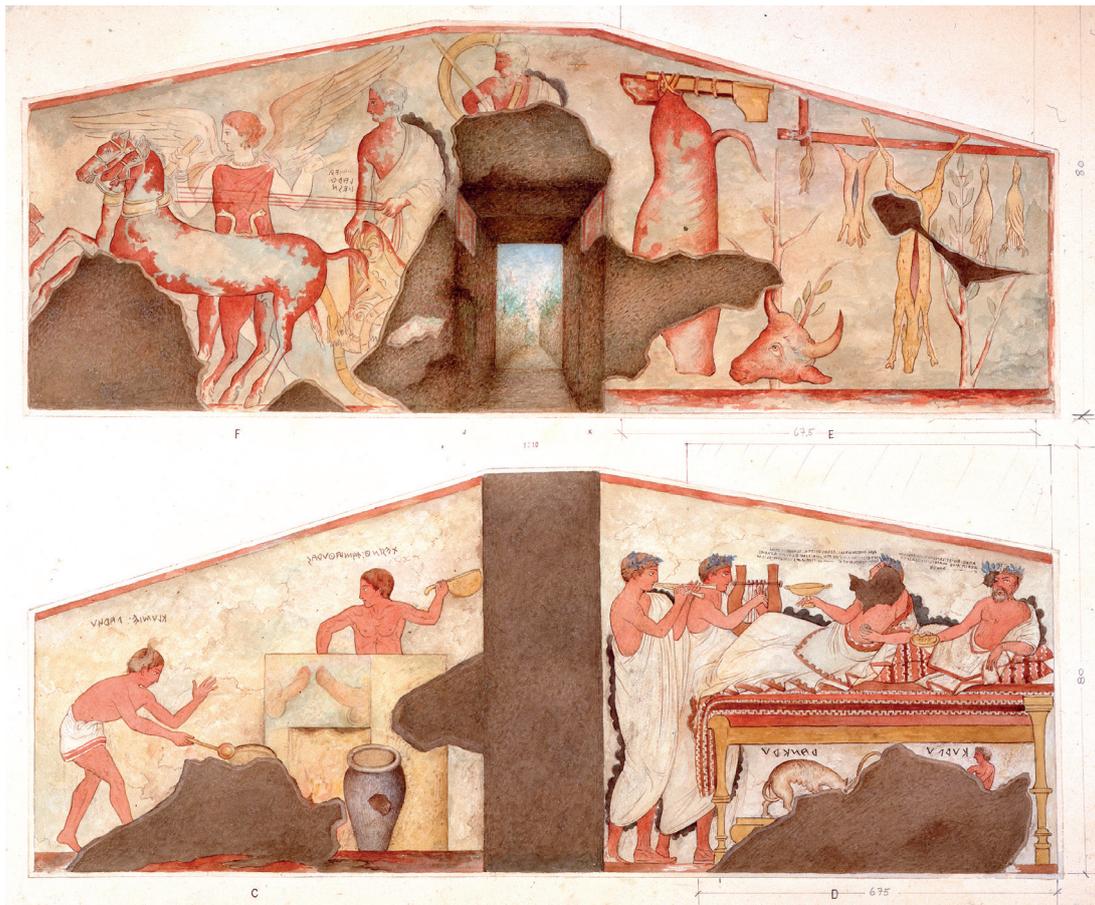


Fig. 3

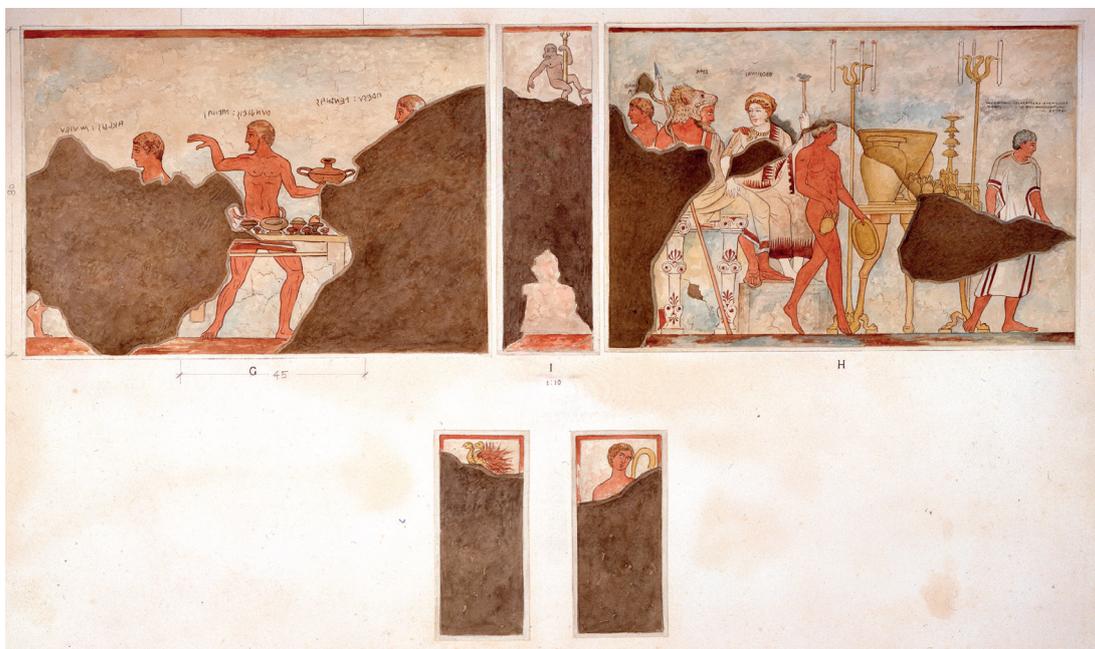


Fig. 4

**Figs. 1-4** Watercolour reproduction of the paintings in the Tomba Golini, Orvieto, c. 350-325 BC (Reproduced by courtesy of the Archivio fotografico Museo delle Antichità etrusche e italiane, Polo museale Sapienza, Sapienza Università di Roma)

and their female counterparts (shown in white, embroidered dresses) are busy laying out dishes on four round tables that will be placed in front of the banqueters' couches shown in the right half of the tomb. The food is shown in considerable detail: several pomegranates are particularly clear, as well as bunches of grapes that are placed (on top of bread?) on each individual serving dish<sup>11</sup>. The depiction of these pieces of fruit specifically provides an apt example of innovative painting techniques (the subtle shading of colours) going hand-glove with the representation of novel motifs<sup>12</sup>. To the right of this scene, a male servant is kneading or mixing the ingredients, (presumably) to be cooked in the oven that is shown next.

The oven-scene is prominently depicted on the left half back chamber-wall and involves two labelled male servants. One of them is about to dip a ladle into a storage vessel that flanks the left side of a large oven, while the other is vigorously chopping something on the oven top, wielding a crescent-shaped cleaver with his left hand while pressing down the presumed object of his efforts with his right. The oven itself is wide, affording sufficient room for two tall *dolia* that flank either side of its mouth; and it also stands remarkably high since it reaches up to the second servant's stomach who seems to be standing on an elevated level relative to the first. Most strikingly, the oven's surface above the blazing fire is decorated with two large *phalloi* facing each other, which were probably intended as an apotropaic device. The oven-scene might have been meant to be the focal point of the tomb's left half, yet we must not forget that a hypothetical ancient viewer, aided only by torch-light, viewed the scenes as she went along the walls<sup>13</sup>. This is very different from the modern experience of seeing ancient tomb paintings by electric light, which immediately draws attention to the back wall upon the viewer's entering of the tomb.

At any rate, the theme of food preparation and service is completed only with the final scene of the left tomb-half. This is painted on the chamber's semi-partitioning wall and has the figures of three male servants in it. While all three are labelled, only the central one survives in full: he is picking up drinking vessels from a table that is laden with shapes that clearly represent commonly found pottery (and metal) shapes of the Hellenistic period in Italy, presumably to place them in front of the banqueting aristocrats of the tomb's right half.

Yet this half begins (on the right face of the semi-partitioning wall) with a scene that neither involves any consumption of food or drink nor has anything in it that resembles the food items or artefacts of the preparation scenes. Instead, we see the ruler of the Underworld and his wife, who are named as *Aita* and *Phersipnai* and represented with their stock attributes. The drinking vessels and a *thymiaterion* that are piled up on an outsized table in front of them are all of gold, as are the table itself and the candelabra flanking it, all of which sets them apart from the paraphernalia that are placed in

11 The pomegranate had been traditional in Etruscan funerary iconography, in this case going back as far as the Orientalising period.

12 Cf. Steingraber 2006, 206–207.

13 Cf. Pairault-Massa 1983, 24, who suggests that the knife-wielding cook, designated as *tesinθ tamiaturos*, equated to a *zilaθ* 'di cucina'.

front of the human banqueteers<sup>14</sup>. The male servant attending the divine couple is depicted as nude, without the loincloth that dresses his counterparts in the kitchen and service departments. Although it might add religious or, possibly, eschatological flavour to the tomb's decoration, this scene is thus deliberately set apart from the other activities shown, as well as from the real (hence named) remaining banqueteers. It has been rightly observed that these were once shown (since, with one exception, the remaining banqueting pairs are badly damaged) as part of an historically improbable get-together of up to five generations of the *Leinie* clan. Yet this simply reinforces the idealising message of the funerary painting – the family's different generations representing a powerful social unit – while not taking anything away from its value as a fundamentally realistic depiction of aristocratic feasting.

Of the human banqueteers, only the pair of laurel-wreathed bearded men on the right half of the back chamber-wall survive in a reasonably good condition. Lengthy *elogia* above these figures identify them as prominent members of the clan, while entertainment is provided by two beardless *aulos* players. Although the reclining men are shown as drinking, with no food having been placed in front of them yet, the obvious conclusion to draw from watching the sequence of paintings from left to right is that the dishes prepared in the kitchen are about to be brought to the banquet. Unfortunately, not much survives of the other banqueting scenes, apart from the *elogia*: yet, the fact that no traces of table legs are detectable in the lower half of the panels indicates that these, too, depicted an early stage of the event prior to the arrival of food.

For other, better-preserved scenes of elite socialising involving food, we now turn to the main chamber of the roughly contemporary Tomba degli Scudi (Tomb of the Shields) at Tarquinia, which features the life-size painting of Larth Velcha and Velia Seithiti on its right wall (Fig. 5), placed diagonally opposite another couple on the left wall<sup>15</sup>. Reclining on a richly decorated couch in one front of a lengthy *elogium*, Larth is placing an egg in his wife's palm. She is herself sitting down facing him at the other end and being attended to by a diminutive (or adolescent) female servant holding a fan. While the motif of spouses sharing a couch had been known in funerary painting and sculpture since the Archaic period, the presence of a wide table that is richly laden with food is unprecedented. This table is about two-thirds of the couch's width and almost as high. On it, we can still identify different types of bread and baked goods, in addition to grapes and another type of fruit or olives, while the dish at the centre is difficult to identify.

The scene opposite is similar in composition, except that this couple of banqueteers – Larth's parents Velthur Velcha and Ravnthu Aprthnai – is attended to by two male musicians and that, in this instance, the husband is holding a libation bowl (*patera*)

14 See now Wikander's (2022) detailed study of these devices, with references to earlier literature.

15 Steingraber 1985, 350 fig. 297 pl. 146; Steingraber 2006, 210. For the plan, see Steingraber 1985, 395 (no. 92); Steingraber 2006, 309 (no. 92). What survives of the painting of a third, probably ancestral couple on the back chamber-wall has no surviving images of food or drink in it: cf. Steingraber 1985, 350 fig. 296 pl. 145; Steingraber 2006, 222–223.



**Fig. 5** Larth Velcha and Velia Seithiti in the Tomba degli Scudi (Tomb of the Shields), Primi Arci necropolis, Tarquinia, c. 325 BC. Photograph courtesy of the Diathek, DAI, Rome (D-DAI-ROM-81.4363)

in his left<sup>16</sup>. The motif of an egg being passed is missing from this scene, while the food-stuffs spread out on the table are virtually identical to those offered to the other couple. In the Tomba degli Scudi, too, it should be noted that the banquet shown involves several generations (at least three, in this case)<sup>17</sup>. We should again take this as emblematic of the idealising nature of Etruscan tomb paintings and furthermore note that any explicitly eschatological motifs are either missing or not preserved in this case.

## Discussion

### The social currency of cultural practices involving food

The significance of the banqueting scenes discussed here to the study of Etruscan social history is widely recognised. Thus, previous studies have correctly laid much emphasis on how individual banqueteers were represented as high-ranking individuals by means of innovations in portraiture and epigraphic practice during the Hellenistic age<sup>18</sup>. In addition, several scholars have also pointed to possibly shifting gender roles

16 Steingraber 1985, 350 fig. 298 pl. 147.

17 Unfortunately, few details survive of the other reclining couples who were once depicted in the main chamber: cf. Steingraber 1985, 350.

18 See Steingraber 2006, 189–191, for an overview and further references.

in relation to the depiction, especially in Tarquinian paintings, of elite wives as seated in this period, whereas they had consistently been shown as reclining next to their husbands during the preceding Archaic period<sup>19</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, the exceptional composition of the paintings in Golini I has invited particularly detailed approaches. The most influential of these has been F.-H. Pairault-Massa's (1983) reading of this tomb's iconography as symbolising the relationship between *domini* and *servi* in Volsinian society during the fourth century BC, with the dichotomy being symbolised not only by the visual and, partly, physical separation between the two halves of the painting but also through the contrasting use of inscriptions: real *elogia* for the elite banqueteers are set in contrast to shorter titles that denote the hierarchies (and also ambitions) among the servant class. More recently, C. Pizzirani (2014) has proposed an interpretation of the tomb and its paintings as closely related to the nearby *Fanum Voltumnae*, now generally held to be identical with the sanctuary excavated at Campo della Fiera outside Orvieto<sup>20</sup>. According to her view, the iconography represents food being prepared in the context of a feast at the sanctuary in which members of the *Leinie* clan supposedly held important priestly roles<sup>21</sup>, while the hierarchy among the servants should be understood in terms of a college of cooks and kitchen staff, parallels for which exist in other Italic and Mediterranean contexts<sup>22</sup>. My approach complements both scholars' views but, rather than focusing on the cultural practices shown in this and other paintings (cooking, banqueting), looks at the question why food as the subject of those practices apparently acquired such currency within the social symbolism of the elite during the early Hellenistic period, whereas such a prominent role had previously been reserved for wine<sup>23</sup>. Although this change has previously been noted, no conclusive explanation has been offered in terms of social and cultural history<sup>24</sup>. Within the limits of this short contribution, I now sketch out a possible path towards this endeavour that also considers other aspects of food production and diet that are known from both material culture and literary sources.

19 E.g., Izzet 2007, 85–86.

20 For this important site, see the overview by Stopponi 2009.

21 Pizzirani 2014, 66–70, points to the presence of haruspices among the banqueteers (marked by their characteristic caps), a priestly role that is also represented in Golini II which belonged to the same family.

22 The apparent hierarchy among the servants shown in Golini I is addressed, with different emphases, by Pairault-Massa 1983, 21–26, and Pizzirani 2014, 64–66, 83–84. Notably, the former focuses on the *Lebenswelt* of the servants being shown in terms of a *petite société*, while the latter stresses (to the point of forcing) the parallels to *collegia* of cooks and servants that are epigraphically attested elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean. Both authors refer to the intriguing similarities and differences that exist between the painting in Golini I and the roughly contemporary iconography of the so-called Brussels Cista from Praeneste (cf. Menichetti 1995, 133, no. 12 fig. 95; CIL I<sup>2</sup> 1447).

23 Riva 2017.

24 Cf. Colivicchi 2016.

### The social currency and symbolism of food

Although a recent survey of banqueting and food has rightly pointed to the appearance of food in Etruscan iconography during the Hellenistic period, this development has not been commented upon by studies that are concerned with the funerary character of such depictions<sup>25</sup>. This is even more surprising since, traditionally, Etruscologists have emphasised the wide-ranging changes which took place in this period, such as, most notably, the proliferation of motifs that explicitly relate to death as well as, possibly, to eschatological beliefs. As noted above, an especially interesting aspect of the representation of specific foodstuffs is the striking realism that is achieved through the technical innovations seen in Etruscan painting of the period, but which cannot merely be coincidental. On the contrary, we should interpret this as the result of an endeavour on the artists' part to create exaggerated likenesses for the purpose of representing an idealised reality here, in a comparable way to those in which portraiture, the representation of dress and adornment and, for that matter, individual *elogia* also functioned during this period.

Thus, it was not only important that the elites had access to food in elaborate settings of commensality, but it also mattered what they ate. By representing both wild and domesticated types of meat, the painter of the Tomba Golini I most effectively pointed towards the impressive range of options that were at the elite's disposal in respect of this highly prized category of food<sup>26</sup>. Fruit and different types of bread or baked goods feature in all tomb paintings under consideration here, and again it would seem that the emphasis is both on the quality and variety of the produce on offer. South Etruscan elites were ideally in the position of having access to everything which animal husbandry, hunting, arboriculture, viticulture and agriculture could produce. Therefore, it is also impossible not to see the detailed representation of food as a way of idealising the extent of territorial control on the part of the aristocracy. This offers a contrast to the Archaic period, when the emphasis placed on the drinking of imported wine associated with specific paraphernalia had idealised the elite's access to Mediterranean-wide networks of social and economic exchange<sup>27</sup>.

But what was the significance of these changes in funerary iconography in the historical context of fourth-century South Etruria or, rather, central Italy more widely? A first point of departure lies in the basic and rather general observation that food-security was not a given in any pre-modern society. More specifically, we can point to the evidence which the Etruscan Brontoscopic Calendar provides for the permanent fear of bad harvests and thus of famines, and the links which are established between those calamities and social unrest there<sup>28</sup>. Complimentary evidence for this comes from

25 Cf. Colivicchi 2016.

26 See also Barbieri 1987; cf. Turfa 2012, 154.

27 Riva 2017. Cf. also d'Agostino – Cerchiai 1999; and contributors to Ciacci et al. 2007.

28 Turfa 2012, 136–164.

the narrative tradition of early Roman history. Thus, while he is possibly a literary creation, the figure of Sp. Maelius and his proposed scheme to import grain from Etruria to curry favour with the famine-plagued Roman populace in 439 BC probably reflects a historical reality in which food-supply and the ability to control it were of critical importance<sup>29</sup>. In addition, recent investigations into food consumption and farming practices are of considerable relevance here. On the one hand, these studies show that Etruscan (and central Italian) diets below the level of the elites were not greatly varied, with the consumption of meat, in particular, being reserved for rare occasions that might also have been elite-controlled (e.g., sacrificial feasts)<sup>30</sup>. On the other hand, there is strong evidence to show that the ability to create significant agricultural surpluses increased from the middle of the first Millennium<sup>31</sup>. This seems to have been result of more extensive forms of cultivation and, quite possibly, also of an improved ability to coordinate the production of different types of produce, which would, in turn, have been favoured by socio-economic cohesion among the elites: people who ultimately controlled the land and agriculture and animal husbandry with it.

In the case of South Etruria, socio-economic cohesion may have come about as a function of territorial dynamics that are sometimes (and somewhat misleadingly) referred to as ‘internal colonisation’<sup>32</sup>. Thus, from the late fifth century several South Etruscan centres extended their control over agriculturally productive inland areas in rivalry with one another, as can clearly be demonstrated in the case of the city of Tarquinia that encroached on territory formerly controlled by Caere<sup>33</sup>. The recurring conflicts between Rome and Veii almost certainly fit into the same context, as does the proliferation of fortified sites across South Etruria during this period<sup>34</sup>. Funerary epigraphy provides our most solid evidence for these developments since it allows us to trace not only the movement of elite clans from the old *metropoleis* to existing or newly established centres in their territory but also the fashion in which these connexions were subsequently cemented and further expanded by way of marriage alliances<sup>35</sup>. In the case of Orvieto-Volsinii, we furthermore see a trend among the elites to move to the city’s rural surrounds: this is at least suggested by the existence of small clusters of elaborate hypogea in rural locations, of which the Golini tombs provide prime examples.

This elite-driven expansion into inland territories fits well not only with evidence for new agricultural regimes but also with the emphasis on land as a productive resource within the ideology of South Etruscan aristocrats, as shown by the tomb paintings

29 Liv. 4, 13; cf. Cornell 1995, 270–271.

30 Shriver-Rice – Schmidt 2022.

31 Trentacoste – Lodwick 2023.

32 Fundamental: Colonna 1967; Colonna 1974; cf. also Terrenato 2019, 97–102.

33 Colonna 1967. The epigraphic evidence is conclusively discussed by Morandi Tarabella 2004; cf. also Colivicchi 2020.

34 For an overview, see Pulcinelli 2016.

35 Chiesa 2005.

discussed here.<sup>36</sup> Territorial control meant privileged access to the resources provided by productive land and found its idealised expression in the smorgasbords of funerary iconography. In contrast to the monotonous, largely plant-based diets of the population at large, South Etruscan elites drew status from the fact that they could enjoy the choicest produce of their territories, refined by the culinary skill of their specialist servants at work in sophisticated kitchens, which is shown in Golini I. By extension, this placed them in a position to claim considerable standing as the guarantors of their subject population's food supply which, in turn, constituted a highly significant source of social power.

## Conclusion

The prominent representation of food in several South Etruscan tomb paintings provides us with important insights into the social ideals of an elite for whom the control of fertile territories and resultant food supply served as fundamental sources of power vis-à-vis those who produced and processed that food. This must be placed in a wider central Italian context in which competition over land-based resources intensified and rural settlement expanded through various forms of territorial 'in-filling' that are archaeologically documented from the late fifth century: of these, colonisation represents only one, albeit very important, aspect<sup>37</sup>. By placing emphasis on the variety of foodstuffs available to the elites, South Etruscan tomb paintings furthermore idealise a type of agricultural production that is distinct from later, more intensive and specialised types. Rather, the point was that the elites had at their disposal the power to coordinate not only what was produced on their land but also how it was distributed, while agricultural activities themselves probably took place in the context of small to medium-sized operations as are in evidence elsewhere, too, such as the slightly later wine production on the island of Ischia<sup>38</sup>. Far from being decadent devotees to *truphē*, therefore, South Etruscan aristocrats of the Hellenistic period could have given the Elder Cato a run for his money, and well before his time at that.

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36 See also Aigner-Foresti 2018, who convincingly stresses the role of Etruscan elites as politically well-organised and economically ambitious during this period, as opposed to their stereotypical decadence that is portrayed by Greek and Roman authors.

37 Cf. Terrenato 2019, 34–43. 219–226.

38 Olcese 2005/2006.

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