



The Graeco-Roman city of Paestum

The Tomb of the Diver

Outside of the walls of the city lay the cemeteries of Poseidonia. The burials of the people of Poseidonia also fit well with Greek cultural traditions.

A spectacular find of a painted tomb illustrates this. Although this painted tomb is unique in the Greek world, analysis of its style and content reveal its Greek qualities. The tomb was dug like a grave into the rock and stone slabs formed coffin-like walls. The interior was then plastered and painted.

On the long walls were painted scenes of banqueting. Pairs of men recline on couches, conversing, drinking, eating, flirting, playing or listening to music. On one of the end walls, a figure pours out a jug, presumably filled with wine and water mixed in the large crater. These are scenes from a symposium, a ritualised, cultured feast and drinking party enjoyed by the elite males of Greece. A quintessential, almost stereotypical, image of Greek cultural behaviour.

It is not just the content of the pictures that may be seen as Greek, their style can be identified as Archaic Greek. The angular poses and features, the profiles, the outlines, the composition and the stylised details are all characteristic of Archaic art, although the figures do have individuality and some life-like anatomical details that bring them closer to the Classical style.

Yet within the conventions that may be identified, there is something more. The painting also has an emotional content, the pleasure in the scenes, the obvious amorous intent made evident though the poses, composition and gestures is clearly something that the painter wished to express in the tomb. This observation leads to the temptation to interpret the other scenes in the tomb as potentially having an emotional content or other intended meaning. On the fourth short side, a nude figure walks in procession. Is this a scene of leave-taking featuring the deceased?

What is more, a dialogue of Plato, *The Symposium*, consists of a series of more or less philosophical discussions set in the context of a symposium. Although written at least one hundred year later than the paintings, the philosophical arguments put forward by the banqueters concern the nature of love, set out in a hierarchy from love of male physical beauty to a love of moral beauty to the beauty of knowledge and from there to the love of absolute beauty. This hierarchy is paralleled with a transition from the world of the senses to the world of the spirit. Naturally enough, these philosophical ideas have been looked for in the tomb paintings.

On the inside of the lid of the tomb is the painting that gives the modern name to the tomb, the Tomb of the Diver. This can be subjected to stylistic analysis, but the temptation, given the content of the other paintings, is to read a narrative with meaning and significance into the painting. Is this justifiable? Is the diving figure a representation of the dead person buried in the tomb? Is the dive from the platform through the air into the sea a metaphor for the passage from life into death? From the physical to the spiritual world?

It is impossible to be sure, but it must be the case that the paintings had a significance of some sort in the context of a burial. A saying attributed to the contemporary poet Simonides captures the possibilities: 'Painting is silent poetry, and poetry painting that speaks'. It is impossible to make conclusive assertions, but a consideration of the broader cultural context does at least create some possibilities for determining the significance of the paintings.

Stylistic similarities between the tomb paintings and painting on vases mean that the paintings can be placed at the boundary between Archaic and Classical Greek art. But it is difficult to be

certain that these paintings, from a Western Greek city in Italy, are typical of Greek painting generally. What is more, the most similar contemporary tomb paintings are found outside of the Greek world in Etruria, and it is possible that Etruscans from Pontecagnano, the neighbouring city to the north of Poseidonia may have played some role in influencing the local styles of painting that developed in the Greek city as well as influence from the Greek mainland.