



Learning from human remains: Seianti's skeleton

The sarcophagus

Dr Judith Swaddling:

This is a monumental terracotta sarcophagus of an Etruscan woman. You see her reclining on the top, and the figure is almost life size. Now, inside the sarcophagus was found her skeleton. This is in fact then most complete Etruscan skeleton in existence. And using the evidence of that and the sarcophagus itself we've been able to build up a really good picture of the woman who was buried in it, how the sarcophagus was made and burial practises at that time.

The image represents a very wealthy Etruscan woman whose name we know, because it's inscribed on the base of the chest. It reads from right to left, as was normal with Etruscan writing. So we know from that that her names included Seianti Hanunia and Telesnasa. We don't actually have her first name, unfortunately, so we don't know what her friends and her relations called her, but we affectionately call her Seianti.

So Seianti is actually a family name, and then we have Hanunia, which was a clan name, and then Telesnasa, which means that she was married into the family of Telesna. And both the Telesna and the Seianti families were well-known in the area of Chiusi and they can be traced back over several centuries.

Chiusi is a very important city, or was a very important city in northern Etruria, and it's about 130 kilometres north of Rome. This sarcophagus was found just about four kilometres outside of Chiusi, in a small area called Poggio Cantarello, and unfortunately the location of the tomb is now lost. In fact, there probably wasn't very much to see from the ground surface anyway, because it consisted of just a small chamber tomb which was reached by a passageway leading down from the ground surface, and that was closed off by a couple of paniles.

Her tomb was actually cut out of the rock and there was a short passageway leading down into it. It's interesting that the actual tomb itself was quite small, and in fact the sarcophagus, which was at the back of that tomb, was almost up to the height of the roof, and the width of the sarcophagus just fitted into the chamber. So there was very little room to move around. And we can only conjecture as to how the sarcophagus was actually taken down into the tomb. It was made in sections. As you can see, there's the chest, which is the largest part, and then there is a flat lid which is made in two pieces. And then on top of that sits the figure, or lies the figure of Seianti, which is also in two sections. And altogether this weighs just under three-quarters of a ton.

Inside the sarcophagus there was just the skeleton, nothing else. And the only other items in the tomb was some silverware. All that we have of this now unfortunately is a photograph, because very sadly it disappeared at about the time of the last world war. But it was silverware which doesn't seem to have been for everyday use, so it was made especially for the tomb. So it was symbolic in a way, and at the time when the tomb was opened, they were actually hanging on nails around the sarcophagus. So what was included was a mirror, which had a highly-polished surface, so although it was quite thin it could actually be used for reflection. There was a situla, which was a kind of bucket in which maybe cosmetics could be kept.

There are also two other small silver containers which would have been used for cosmetics. And in fact, if you look closely at Seianti you'll see she's wearing her makeup. She has this white pigment on her face, and of course it was fashionable then to look pale, and this contrasted strongly with the outdoors, suntanned appearance of the men.

The sarcophagus is made of terracotta. And it was quite a feat of manufacture because these are very heavy sections. It would be very difficult to fire without cracking. And the artist has managed to model it very carefully and some of the details he's reproduced are extremely lifelike. If you look at the folds in Seianti's elbow, they are just like real flesh, and it does look as though he's had a real model for this part of the figure.

What we've got here is possibly a real face that he's modelled on Seianti, but he's possibly fixed it onto the body of a model that he used at the time. So he's got a real person posing in front of him, and in fact we could tell by looking inside the sarcophagus that the face has been made like a kind of mask that has been fixed into the rest of the head.

The whole of the sarcophagus was coloured originally, and it was covered in a white pigment to make it look like marble. So in its pristine state it would have been a bright white colour, and it's interesting to think what it would have been like in antiquity for anybody entering the tomb, because you would go down this passage in the complete darkness, maybe carrying a torch, and there suddenly in front of you would be this gleaming white figure, with the colour picked out in detail. So she would have been very stunning.

The sarcophagus was excavated in 1886, by a local professional digger who was called Oreste Mignone. And he passed it on to Wolfgang Helvig, who was the secretary of the Archaeological Institute in Rome, and he acquired this for the British Museum. It was actually bought by us the following year, in 1887, for the princely sum, including the skeleton and everything, of £495.