



Learning from human remains: Seianti's skeleton

Who was Seianti?

Dr Judith Swaddling:

We know, for several reasons, that Seianti must have been a wealthy woman and of high status. The fact that she had a tomb all to herself shows us that she was very important. And also the way in which she is depicted, wearing fine clothes and fine jewellery, and quite a lot of jewellery. She's wearing this diadem and a strap necklace, all of the items which were gold have actually been depicted in this ochre colour, but of course they are meant to be gold. So in addition to the necklace, there are the bracelets, the snake bracelets. Even this bracelet on the upper arm was probably the back of a snake bracelet.

She's wearing a lot of rings on the left-hand side. She has six rings there. Maybe she kept them on her left hand because you would eat while you were reclining with your right hand, and so you wouldn't want to get particles of food lodged in the rings. She's also wearing earrings, gold and garnet earrings. And we can parallel all of these types of jewellery with finds that have occurred around the Mediterranean. So at that period Etruria was very much under the influence of the Greeks, or rather Greek styles, and so the clothing that she is wearing and the jewellery are those of a cosmopolitan woman who could have come from anywhere around the classical world.

The clothes which Seianti is wearing are traditional Hellenistic clothes. She's wearing a tunic, a white tunic which is fastened at the shoulders and stitched up the sides as far as the armholes. That would be quite lightweight. But then she's wearing a veil which is rather heavier. In fact, I wonder whether she's actually wearing bridal gear, because this gesture of lifting the veil has often been associated with brides, and maybe if we also take the evidence of the jewellery, which occurs in sets around the Mediterranean, this may have been some kind of traditional wedding outfit. And just possibly we see her here decked in her wedding outfit ready to meet her husband again in the afterlife. And she's got this rather alert expression on her face. She's just adjusted her veil, she's looked in the mirror to check her makeup, and maybe that's what's next to happen in imagination, that there's going to be this reunion with her loved ones.

In her left hand, Seianti's holding a mirror. And this isn't the normal type of mirror which we see of that period. Usually they are almost like a sort of old fashioned dressing table mirror with a disk and a long handle, but she's wearing what is an enlarged compact type of mirror. It's a disk with a lid. And sometimes these lids were elaborately decorated. Not that many of them were produced. They were somewhat popular around the 3rd century BC, but they were quite heavy and they were soon discarded in favour of the more slender, lightweight version again. It's interesting that it's shown painted green, because this indicates corrosion, and of course you couldn't see yourself in a corroded mirror. Maybe what the Etruscans had in mind was that the spirit of that mirror went into the underworld with Seianti and maybe what you were left with was the sort of husk, the useless part of it, and that's what they've shown. That's one explanation. It's a weird concept.

Seianti's reclining on her left elbow, and this is exactly as she would have reclined at banquet, and Etruscan women did of course dine with their husbands at banquets. But also she could be reclining on the marriage couch, if we maintain this idea of a kind of second wedding, as it were. And she have been reclining on the couch also having been dressed by her servants.

The actual concept of a figure reclining on a sarcophagus is purely Etruscan. And often Etruscan original ideas tend to be ignored because we tend to credit the Romans with everything, but this was something which was passed down through the Romans and we find some of the early Roman sarcophagi will depict the deceased on the lid. Then the fashion subsides somewhat.

Seianti is shown as quite a robust woman. She looks like a healthy country type. She's quite portly. But in antiquity being quite portly, or in the case of men, quite corpulent would indicate that you were well-to-do, that you could afford to eat well, and so it was a sign of the aristocracy. But it is interesting with Seianti, because the upper part of her torso in her actual skeleton is quite slender. She has quite delicate bones. And so I really doubt that she was actually this hefty, and I think here again we've possibly got the influence of the artist using a real model for Seianti at the time that he depicted her.

We don't know anything else about Seianti herself. We do know that she had this relation Lavia, who was also buried near Chiusi, and we know the families of both Seianti and her husband were well known. But apart from that there's nothing.

Seianti provides us probably with the only opportunity that we're ever going to get to come up close and personal with a real Etruscan, because we've been able to find out so much about her, about her lifestyle, her health, obviously the type of clothes that she wore and so on. But she was a real person and she's got this very alert expression, so we can relate to that, and it's interesting when you come into the gallery when it's very quiet it almost looks like a real person lying here.

But she's great fun to talk about. Bringing groups around the gallery, it's when you introduce them to Seianti and tell them what we know about her, even the fact that she must have had a lot of pain from her bad teeth and so on, and the poor woman had bad breath and so on, they suddenly find that it's somebody that they can get to know. It's not an array of objects for which we can guess the use and so on. She's a real person.

I feel as though I've got to know her quite well. People tend to come in sometimes and look at her and say, 'oh, rather matronly figure,' and I get rather defensive because she looks a kindly soul. I often wonder why she was buried in that tomb all on her own. Maybe it was her high status. But then perhaps something had happened to the rest of her family. Maybe she was alone in the world. Who knows? We can only guess. It would be nice to write a novel about her one day.