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Verreth, L.

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Tracing Receptions of Etruscan Culture in Italian and European Modernism (c. 1890-1950)

Review of: Chiara Zampieri, Martina Piperno & Bart Van den Bossche (eds.), *Modern Etruscans. Close Encounters with a Distant Past*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2023, 187 p., ISBN: 9789462703797, € 30,00 (also available in Open Access).

Louis Verreth

The Etruscans are known to us as the ancient people who flourished during the 7th and 6th centuries B.C. in the regions of Tuscany and Umbria. After their decline around the first century B.C., as they assimilated into Roman culture, they have remained shrouded in mystery given the fact that relatively few sources survive to reconstruct their history. Our idea of the Etruscans today is in large part informed by the successful excavations conducted in Italy from the early 20th century onwards, which brought about new scientific knowledge about Etruscan culture, language, and lifestyle. Nonetheless, many serious interpretative problems regarding the Etruscans remain.

In the 21st century, these dilemmas have led the field of Etruscan Studies (or Etruscology) to become less and less practiced. Instead, scholars seem to have been exchanging the history and archeology of the Etruscans with the reception of their ancient culture in later times. This new interest for the afterlife of the Etruscans has increased especially in the last decade, and can be illustrated with two important examples. To begin with, the later reception of the Etruscans and the history of Etruscan Studies have now been included as relevant topics in two major reference works for Etruscologists, *A Companion to the Etruscans* (eds. Sinclair Bell and Alexandra Carpino, 2016) and *Etruscology* (ed. Alessandro Naso, 2017), whereas previously these subjects (especially the reception history) had been dealt with rather scarcely in encyclopedic works. Another example is the appearance of a first large-scale conference on receptions of Etruscan culture: in February 2023, Rome's Swedish and French Institutes brought together an international group of scholars to discuss the topic, focusing on the discovery of Etruscan material culture in the early modern and modern periods. The book under review, *Modern Etruscans*, provides an important contribution to this new strand of studies, as it is the first publication to deal with the reception of Etruscan antiquity with a focus on the modernist period (1890-1950).

Unlike what one might think given the few existing studies on the topic, receptions of the Etruscans were widespread in the modernist period. The nine contributions brought together in this volume by editors Chiara Zampieri, Martina Piperno, and Bart Van den Bossche, demonstrate for the first time that Etruscan culture provided a rich source of inspiration for modernist authors and artists. The individual contributors each offer a case-study of an interaction between modernism

and Etruscan material culture (although the timeframe is slightly broader, also encompassing the end of the 19th century and the period following World War II). Most of the contributors discuss receptions of Etruscan culture in one specific artistic medium, especially prose writing, but also sculpture, film, and other media.

The rich materials covered by this book reflect this “multimedial” reality of Etruscans’ receptions in the modernist period. Some of the articles revisit known cases in the 20th century: the Etruscan cemeteries described in *Etruscan Places* by D.H. Lawrence, or the Etruscan tomb of Cerveteri from the opening scene of *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* by Giorgio Bassani. Other contributions bring to light new materials for the study of receptions in modernist prose, in the genres of the short story (Aldous Huxley, Luciano Bianciardi), travel writing (Corrado Alvaro, Alberto Savinio, Vincenzo Cardarelli), and *prosa d’arte* (Malaparte and the same Cardarelli). Still other papers examine receptions beyond literature, discussing materials such as “Etruscan-like” sculptures by Massimo Campigli and other avant-garde artists, German schoolbooks with rather strong ideological discussions of the Etruscans, and Italian horror movies featuring Etruscan-inspired demons.

Each of these materials is studied within the context of the nascent academic discipline of Etruscan Studies in the early 20th century. This reflects the main goal of the book as the editors formulate it in the introduction (p. 12), ‘to advance the study of the interplay between archeological knowledge and various literary and cultural practices by launching a truly comparative and cross-disciplinary conversation on the topic.’ Martina Piperno’s contribution, for example, illustrates that the editors succeed in showing the processes of cross-pollination between science and the arts, *casu quo* between Etruscan Studies and Reception Studies. Piperno shows that Giorgio Bassani was heavily influenced by contemporary writings of ancient historians who pictured the Etruscans as a people “wiped away from the earth” by the Romans. As Piperno argues convincingly, this discourse was taken up by Bassani when developing an analogy between the defeated Etruscans and the traumatic experiences of the Jewish community in Fascist Italy.

The editors intend the ensemble of case-studies to be not only a scholarly publication, but also a ‘learning tool for university courses’ (book cover). It indeed offers much food for thought to an audience of advanced students in various humanistic fields. However, the book is a rather traditionally edited volume. If it were to serve as a learning tool for students, the editors could have stated explicitly how it can be used as such by university teachers. It could have benefited from some minor additions to help students in their learning process, such as cross-references within the book where the same primary source is being discussed, a more elaborate index with pivotal Etruscan objects and modernist texts, or a timeline with the most decisive discoveries in Etruscan Studies and notable moments in the history of modernism.

As a contribution to the scholarship on receptions of Etruscan culture, however, this book takes important steps forward. The book truly presents a thorough exploration of a period mostly neglected by earlier scholarship on the afterlife of this ancient people. Its appearance will stimulate new research on the topic, as it will not only be a good starting point for the modernist period, but also help scholars with a broader focus to better grasp the *longue durée* reception of Etruscan culture.

Louis Verreth

Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS)
Arsenaalstraat 1, Room A0.32
2311 CT Leiden (The Netherlands)
l.verreth@hum.leidenuniv.nl