

THE HOUSE IN IRON AGE ITALIAN THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

Bryanna Lloyd: The House in Iron Age Italian Thought
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Hut urns, miniaturized huts functioning as cinerary vessels, are found in graves from Etruria and Latium dating to the Early Iron Age. I examine four historical approaches to the study of hut urns: (1) the method of using hut urns as physical models for huts, (2) comparisons between Italian hut urns and Northern European house urns, (3) comparisons between hut urns and later Etruscan tombs, and (4) the examination of hut urns within the funerary context to understand social structures of the Italian Early Iron Age. A more holistic approach to studying hut urns demonstrates that Iron Age Italians imbued their huts with social significance and that the huts were used to create and express elite male social status. It is because of this social significance that the miniaturized huts were used in the funerary context.

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Introduction

Roman houses of the late Republican and early Imperial periods are attested by a breadth of evidence, ranging from treatises like Vitruvius's *De Architectura* to the well-preserved remains of Campanian houses in Pompeii and Herculaneum. When studying the domestic structures of early Iron Age Italy, however, the evidence is much more limited: the textual evidence is not only scanty but dates to many centuries later¹, and the remains of huts consist not of the huts themselves but the impressions, like postholes, that they have left behind. Few would argue against the idea that classical Roman houses carried great social and symbolic significance to the inhabitant or viewer. The structures occupied by Iron Age Italians, however, are treated differently. How were these buildings understood by their inhabitants, and how can we begin to approach this question with no contemporary textual evidence and such scanty archaeological remains of the huts themselves? Hut urns, considered to be miniaturized ceramic representations of these early residences, were buried and therefore survive better than most archaeological evidence from the time. These hut urns are therefore one of the best sources of evidence for understanding these early residences. In this study I will examine various modern academic approaches to Italian hut urns, and by elucidating the strengths, weaknesses, and biases of the previous approaches I will demonstrate that huts were an important part of elite Iron Age Italian social standing. Because of the hut's role in creating and maintaining elite male social status, miniaturized huts were used in the funerary context.

¹ The textual evidence for Iron Ages huts will not be discussed in detail in this paper, but includes Vitruvius 2.1.1-6 on early domestic structures more broadly and a variety of ancient sources (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.79 being the most informative about the physical structure) on the Hut of Romulus specifically.

In this study I will look at four modern academic approaches to Italian hut urns of the early Iron Age, focusing primarily on the period from c. 900 BCE to around 750 BCE. While some authors like Walter Reid Bryan refer to the hut urns as Italic, I have chosen the more inclusive Italian to explicitly account for the use of these objects by both the Italic Latins and the non-Italic Etruscans², and I will therefore refer to them as Italian throughout this paper. The approaches I will examine are: (1) the early method of using hut urns as physical models for huts, (2) comparisons between Italian hut urns and Northern European house urns, (3) comparisons between hut urns and later Etruscan tombs, with a focus on Etruscan religious beliefs, and (4) the examination of hut urns within the funerary context as a tool for understanding social structures of the Italian Early Iron Age. All of these approaches have, through their limited scope and often too-simplistic interpretations, presented a distorted view of both hut urns and actual Iron Age huts. By combining and expanding upon all of these approaches it becomes apparent that despite the biases that have long led scholars to view Iron Age huts as merely shelters from the elements, they were in fact imbued with great cultural significance and meaning by their inhabitants. This significance gave them an important role in constructing and maintaining elite social identity in life and death.

Italian hut urns are, as Bryan sums up succinctly, “a type of ossuary imitating in their appearance the dwelling of the period when the urns were in use.”³ An example of a hut urn with the cremated remains (cremains) inside can be seen in Figure 1. These urns are found in Etruria and Latium and are typically made of *impasto Italiano*, an argillaceous earth that is local to the

² The Etruscan language, of non-Indo-European descent, clearly marks the Etruscans as not Italic, though many scholars use the term Italic when discussing the Etruscans.

³ Bryan (1925): 1

region, and fired without the use of a kiln.⁴ These urns were not the typical vessel for burial and are quite rare: Lars Karlsson calculates around 200 have been found in Latium and Etruria so far.⁵ This fact indicates their special status, as such a narrow range of individuals used this type of urn. The hut urns were part of a larger *corredo*, or burial kit, which contained the hut urn with the ashes and bone fragments inside it along with ceramic and bronze objects.⁶ The ceramics and bronzes were often miniaturized, but not in coastal Etruria.⁷ The ceramics in the *corredo* usually consisted of 3-4 storage containers which could hold food or drink, as well as dining ware including cups, bowls, and plates (see Fig. 2 for examples). The bronze objects were generally a full-sized or miniaturized brooch and razor and miniature weapons, in most cases a spear but occasionally also a sword (see Figs. 3 and 4).⁸ Occasionally a small statuette was included.⁹ All of these objects were then placed in a *dolium* and buried (see Fig. 5).¹⁰ The social implications of the *corredo* will be discussed further later in this paper. Overall, it seems that this type of

⁴ Bryan (1925): 1

⁵ Karlsson (2017): 730

⁶ Cornell (1995): 51-2

⁷ Bartoloni et al (1985): 188

⁸ Cornell (1995): 51-2

⁹ Bietti Sestieri (1992): 120

¹⁰ Cornell (1995): 51-2

cremation burial was reserved for men¹¹, and probably only for elites judging by their rarity, the value of the *corredo* goods, and the difficulty and expense of cremating a body.¹²

Assumptions in Scholarship

Modern scholarship continues to be informed by unacknowledged biases that influence the way we perceive hut urns and huts. One such bias is contained in the term ‘hut’. This is a charged word that suggests a distinction from what we think of as a house. The significance of the use of ‘hut’ came to public attention in a modern context when Donald Trump reportedly referred to domestic structures in Nigeria as ‘huts’, clearly illustrating the pejorative associations that can be entrenched in the terminology.¹³ The word ‘hut’ automatically draws to mind a simple structure occupied by uncultured people, and even when we know better the associations of the word can still influence our understandings. This linguistic differentiation between the residences of Iron Age peoples and the ‘true’ houses of the later Romans is present even in the Roman texts which mention the domestic structures of their ancestors. Vitruvius, whose primary focus at the beginning of Book 2 of *De Architectura* is tracing the development and regional differences of architecture, clearly equates construction to civilization when he argues that “from the construction of buildings [mankind] progressed by degrees to other crafts and disciplines, and

¹¹ The assignment of sex to the cremated bodies is difficult, and relies on a combination of the associated grave goods and basic osteological analysis. In a very limited number of cases, the cremains within a hut urn have been designated female based on the associated graves goods (see Bartoloni (2002): 188). The use of grave goods for sexing a skeleton is clearly problematic, and better osteological methods should be the primary means for such designations. The designations of sex for Osteria dell’Osa involved some rightly contested means, often based on the gracility of bones which is not ideal practice particularly for cremation burials. (Becker and Salvadei (1992); personal communication with Dale L. Hutchinson).

¹² Cornell (1995): 51

¹³ Shear and Davis (2017)

they led the way from a savage and rustic life to a peaceful civilization.”¹⁴ Vitruvius explains that as men became civilized “they began to build, not huts (*casas*), but houses (*domos*), on foundations, and with brick walls, or built of stone; and with roofs of wood and tiles.”¹⁵ This terminology of a transition “from huts to houses” (*dalla capanna alla casa*) is pervasive in scholarship on Iron Age Italian domestic architecture.¹⁶ Though perhaps less explicit, this distinction that huts represent societies before culture and houses represent real civilizations continues to pervade our fundamental approach to the material record. The questions we ask of the remains of a hut and the remains of a domus are entirely different, partially based on surviving evidence but also largely based on our own fundamental (and, as I will demonstrate, flawed) assumption that the domus represented a degree of complexity and symbolism that the hut did not.

The History of Scholarship on Italian Hut Urns

Italian hut urns were first discovered in 1816 by Alessandro Visconti and published in 1823 during one of the earliest excavations of a prehistoric Italian necropolis.¹⁷ The publications on these urns for the next century and a half (and even until today) have largely consisted of catalogues, describing and often illustrating examples with little analysis or interpretation.

¹⁴ Translations of Vitruvius from the Loeb edition by Granger. *tunc vero et fabricationibus aedificiorum gradatim progressi ad ceteras artes et disciplinas, e fera agrestique vita ad mansuetam perduxerunt humanitatem.* 2.1.7

¹⁵ *non casas sed etiam domos fundatas et latericiis parietibus aut e lapide structas materiaque et tegula tecta perficere coeperunt.* 2.1.8

¹⁶ Izzet (2001): 41

¹⁷ Bryan (1925): 1

One of the major areas of research for hut urns in the 1970s and 80s was the use of these objects as models for their contemporary domestic architecture.¹⁸ In Gilda Bartoloni's 1989 manuscript, *La Cultura Villanoviana*, the index lists the urns as *modellini (urne)*, a subcategory under *capanna* – the modern scholar's use of the objects is listed before their ancient function, which follows only in parentheses.¹⁹ In listing the hut urns in this way, Bartoloni is recontextualizing them according to her own modern perspective, marking their original purpose as secondary by physically isolating *urne* inside the parentheses.

It is not difficult to understand why these huts were studied primarily as architectural models for actual domestic structures of the Iron Age. Huts of Iron Age Italy were constructed out of organic materials that are represented in the archaeological record by either sunken floors or postholes and foundation channels. The best-known example of hut remains come from the Palatine Hill in Rome (Fig. 6). The archaeological remains of organic structures are less easily detected and more easily destroyed by subsequent building projects than later, more permanent forms of domestic architecture. This is especially problematic in an area occupied for extensive periods like Rome. Except for some impressions of wood and reeds in bits of plaster and clay, nothing of the superstructures of Iron Age huts remains.²⁰ As a result, our understanding of what the superstructures looked like and how they functioned comes primarily from hut urns and ethnographic comparisons to shepherds' huts used in Latium and Campania well into the 20th century.²¹

¹⁸ Bartoloni et al (1985): 175, 179

¹⁹ Bartoloni (1989): 216

²⁰ Bartoloni et al (1985): 179

²¹ Bartoloni et al (1985): 179-81, Brown (1976): 7

There are significant problems with using hut urns to understand Iron Age huts, however. A basic assumption of early studies of house urns is that the urns were purposely designed to resemble actual houses of the Iron Age. The studies become somewhat circular, with the urns used to create reconstructions of Iron Age houses and then the ‘accuracy’ of the urns tested against the same reconstructions. To treat these urns simply as miniature representations of the houses of the living is to ignore their fundamental function as mortuary objects and all of the symbolic and cultural elements that therefore shaped them, aside from domestic architectural practices. Moreover, by presuming that these small terracotta huts accurately represent Iron Age huts, scholars treat them as miniaturized versions of actual structures, not artistic representations. In doing so, they ignore the way that the huts reflect artistic choices that distort features of actual Iron Age huts. For instance, on many miniaturized huts urns, the structure’s internal features like roof beams are represented on the exterior of the urn in order to make these features visible to the viewer.²² In fact, studies of hut urns rarely take the craftsman into account at all. For example, scholars have noted that hut urns, especially from Latium, are primarily circular, while hut remains themselves reflect a greater variety of forms, with round, oval, square and rectangular plans. Frank Brown noted that the postholes from the Palatine Hill seem to reflect rectangular floors.²³ It used to be argued that these different forms represented chronological changes, but more recent studies like those by Bartoloni have shown that the trends are often more regional, and that various shapes of huts can coexist.²⁴ Yet the cause for this difference between the remains of actual structures and their ‘models’ is rarely discussed. Brown, noting that “the contour of the models is generally more rounded than that of the huts known from excavation,”

²² Bartoloni et al (1985): 184

²³ Brown (1976): 5

²⁴ Bartoloni et al (1985): 177, 196

either attributes this difference to “the instinct of the domestic potter” or assumes that the potter is reproducing a “still more primitive” form that was theoretically round.²⁵ Brown assumes that either the potters are unthinking, simply too used to making round objects to get the hut urns right, or that they are still trying to make accurate models, but of an earlier form of hut. Instead, I would argue that the more rounded form of the urns is a deliberate choice on the craftsman’s part. A rounder vessel is more easily constructed and less fragile, so the choice for a circular form likely represents a practical concern in the production of these urns rather than unthinking ‘instinct’ or nostalgia for an older domestic form. By isolating hut urns from their context in order to study them as models for contemporary domestic structures, we forget that individuals were involved in their creation, making numerous choices regarding their form and appearance. Hut urns were not just mechanically produced, tiny versions of domestic buildings.

Additionally, the choice to use hut urns to recreate the appearance of early Iron Age huts leads to the mistaken belief that to describe a structure is to explain it. Because hut urns allow us to believe that we can reconstruct the appearance of Iron Age huts, the interpretation of these vessels often ends at that point. There are good studies, like Bartoloni et al 1985, which take this architectural comparison one step further by examining not just what the Iron Age structures looked like but whether the hut urns accurately reflect regional variations throughout Etruria and Latium, at sites like Tarquinia and Satricum. Even Bartoloni, however, does not attempt to get more in depth about the way these structures worked beyond describing them. The end goal, it seems, is in fact to make this process even more simplified by coming up with categories for naming and defining these structures, whether it be by shape (quadrangular huts in Tarquinia are for habitation while oval and rectangular shapes are for stables, storerooms, etc.) or by size

²⁵ Brown (1976): 7

(larger huts in Satricum were for elites while smaller ones were for lower status inhabitants).²⁶

This is an understandable tendency: the limited nature of the small finds makes understanding the function of these buildings quite difficult. Nevertheless, we should not use the limited nature of the evidence to justify oversimplification. To do so is to propagate the mistaken belief that Iron Age huts, and the people who occupied them, belonged to primitive societies, and that the huts themselves, unlike the houses of later periods, did not carry any symbolic significance. For this reason, I will frequently refer to the huts of the Iron Age as houses throughout this paper, though I will exclusively refer to the hut urns as such so as to avoid confusion with Northern European house urns.

Italian Hut Urns and Northern European House Urns

In any discussion about hut urns it is important to acknowledge that the practice of using miniaturized structures as repositories for ashes in mortuary contexts in the Early Iron Age is not restricted to Italy, but extends quite far north.²⁷ The practice of using these urns, known as ‘house urns’, extended from the Netherlands and Germany into Poland and Sweden during the Iron Age.²⁸ It is generally argued that the Northern European practice of using house urns was adopted from the Italian “prototype” brought about through long-distance trade between the regions.²⁹

Even in a study focusing on the Italian hut urns exclusively, it is worthwhile to look at the evidence from further north. Examining the way Northern European house urns are studied and

²⁶ Bartoloni et al (1985): 192-8.

²⁷ There are also examples from as far afield as North Africa, Crete, and Cyprus, which I will not touch on here. (Bryan (1925): 2)

²⁸ Bradley (2002): 372

²⁹ Kristiansen (2000): 166

interpreted can shine a light on the preconceived notions and biases that infiltrate the study of Italian hut urns, causing us to reconsider the assumptions that have long formed the backbone of our interpretations of these objects. Many scholars have treated these house urns as wholesale adoptions of the Italian hut urns, assuming that the meaning was adopted along with the form, while others have placed greater emphasis on regional variation and cultural contexts.

Richard Bradley's article (2002), for example, utilizes archaeological studies that have shown that these Northern European house urns do not actually resemble domestic structures from the period, but are actually closer in form to storehouse or granaries. This is because these urns have openings (doors) partway up the vessel, not at ground level, which archaeologists now assume reflect raised floors in the architectural 'prototype' that the urns are imitating.³⁰ Bradley takes this one step further to examine what this difference from Italian hut urns can tell us about Northern European funerary beliefs. He argues that while Italian hut urns symbolize the houses of the dead, Northern European house urns are associated with the fertility of the land through their connection to grain storage, reflecting the cultural significance in Northern Europe of the link between fertility (and possibly rebirth) and death.³¹

Bradley's study provides a valuable model for approaching Italian hut urns. One main aspect is that a relatively minor difference in the form of Northern European hut urns compared to Italian hut urns – that is, that the doors of house urns do not open at ground level but are raised – reflects a rather substantial difference in what they may represent.³² This should be a warning to scholars of Italian hut urns who ignore their great variability – including, in some cases, a

³⁰ Bradley (2002): 373

³¹ Bradley (2002): 374

³² Bradley (2002): 372-3

similarly elevated door level.³³ Bradley's article also conveys how similar objects can convey very different meanings, in this case to different cultures. We should not, however, assume that these objects even conveyed the same messages at all times and to all people within Latium and Etruria. Even if we ignore the differences between tribes, we should not assume that everyone in a community interpreted the urns the same way, though the variations within Latium and Etruria were likely not as great as the differences between Italy and Northern Europe.

Despite their usefulness, there are still problems with even very good studies of Northern European house urns. Although studies like Bradley's acknowledge and competently handle the unique cultural contexts of the Northern European house urns, there is still the underlying sense that the form and interpretation of the Italian hut urns is the default, and any deviation from these must be explained. This assumption seems to stem from the basic understanding of Italian hut urns as the "prototype"³⁴ from which house urns originate. While this is a valuable fact for understanding chronology and trans-European trade, it should not lead to the view of Italian hut urns as the 'true' version and house urns as a deviation from the norm. In this way some studies of Northern European house urns serve to reinforce, not undercut, our preconceptions about Italian hut urns. Like studies of hut urns, these studies of house urns also treat the objects as true models of architecture. Furthermore, they are still plagued by the same issue as many studies of Italian hut urns: the desire to produce one clear 'meaning' for these objects, rather than embracing the multiplicity and complexity of possible interpretations.

From these studies of Northern Europeans hut urns, we see how miniaturized architectural urns can contain culturally specific symbolism. Scholars of Iron Age Italy often see the hut urns as early glimpses of the Etruscan religious connection between domestic architecture

³³ Bartoloni et al (1985): 177

³⁴ Kristiansen (2000): 166

and the funerary sphere. In the next section of this study I will examine the connection between hut urns and later Etruscan funerary architecture of the 7th and 6th centuries and illustrate how this connection alone is not sufficient to understand the complexities of the hut urns or explain their presence in Iron Age graves.

Two Trends in Interpretations: Etruscan Religion and Italic Social Structures

Because of the limited nature of the archaeological record from Iron Age Italy, scholars of both early Latium and Etruria have long utilized evidence from both regions to create a fuller picture. Scholars of each region often work with overlapping material, but those in Etruscan studies and those focused on Roman archaeology often incorporate the Iron Age material into different long-term narratives.³⁵ For scholars of early Etruria, the focus has been on the urns as a reflection of the nascence of religious and cultural beliefs that would become fully formed in Etruscan funerary architecture. For scholars of early Rome, the primary interest in hut urns has been as a reflection on the structure of Iron Age society, often with a focus on how this society developed into the Rome of the historical period. Both, of course, also rely on the hut urns for reconstructing domestic structures.

The end result of these two approaches is that the same body of material receives two separate but not necessarily conflicting interpretations: first, that the hut urns and their associated burial materials are a sign of social stratification in early Iron Age society and reflect elite male status; and second, that the hut urns reflect the beginning of the long-held Etruscan association between the domestic sphere and death/mortuary contexts.

³⁵ The exception seems to be early scholars, such as Bryan writing in the 1920s, who do not draw a distinction in quite this way but seem to instead treat the Etruscan hut urns as a ‘period’ of a wider hut urn chronology, ie. Bryan (1925):3: “To the early urns of *impasto*, there succeeded, in prehistoric and Etruscan times, more elaborate urns...In the full Roman period the same tradition is continued...”

Etruscan Religion

In Etruria (though the interpretations are often applied to hut urns found in Latium) a primary focus is the relationship of the hut urns to later domestic architecture in the region. From this perspective, hut urns are the earliest phase of a long tradition of using domestic imagery in the funerary sphere, which culminated in the large tombs of the late 7th and 6th centuries BCE as exemplified in the necropolis at Cerveteri. These tombs contained an inner chamber that was “a more or less faithful copy of the dwelling house”³⁶ and like hut urns they are often used to understand the domestic architecture of their period.³⁷ The trend of these grand domestic-style tombs was mainly confined to southern Etruria where the abundance of tufa made intricate carving of such large scale features possible.³⁸ An example of one of these carved tombs, the Tomb of the Thatched Roof, can be seen in Figure 7. Prayon suggests a clear ideological continuity between the hut urns and these later tombs when he writes that:

Behind the fashion for this tomb architecture lies the desire – earlier conceptualized by the inhabitants of the Villanovan period, who made cinerary urns in the shape of their own houses for the ashes of the dead, to leave the deceased within his usual environment, his home, and to furnish him with everything he liked that would be useful for him for his life after death.³⁹

Instead of the miniaturized *corredo* that accompanied the hut urns, these tombs contained full-sized furniture, weapons, and food to accompany the dead to the next life.⁴⁰ In the third quarter of the sixth century many of these features began to be carved into the tufa, including deathbeds,

³⁶ Prayon (1986): 180

³⁷ Prayon (1986): 174

³⁸ Prayon (1986): 180

³⁹ Prayon (1986): 180

⁴⁰ Prayon (1986): 180

baskets, seats, chairs, and shields.⁴¹ This is manifested most spectacularly in the Tomb of the Reliefs, seen in Figure 8. Archaeological evidence suggests that these tombs were representative of the houses used in the period, to the extent that even regional variations in house structure are reflected in the tombs, with the single-room cottages found in the countryside of Tuscania in Viterbo mirrored by single square chambered tombs in the area.⁴² In the late 6th century the trend of imitating domestic forms in funerary contexts came to an end, and was replaced with one-room chamber tombs.⁴³

These tombs, and the hut urns as their predecessors, have long been interpreted as an Etruscan preoccupation with life after death, with the primary role of a tomb to serve as a house for the dead.⁴⁴ The importance of death and the afterlife has long been a focus of Etruscan scholarship due to the large and well-preserved necropolises that made up a significant portion of the Etruscan landscape and were quite visible to the Etruscans as they went about their lives.⁴⁵ This has led to the “common perception that, rather like the Egyptians, the Etruscans must have been greatly preoccupied with death.”⁴⁶ While these tombs and their domestic features are clearly seen as a “message of re-birth, of a generative power released at death”⁴⁷ and the belief in an afterlife, it is less clear why the domestic imagery is such a large part of this expression of belief. The general assumption, projected through the lack of discussion on the topic, seems to be strongly influenced by comparisons to the Egyptians, with the perception that a strong belief in

⁴¹ Prayon (1986): 182

⁴² Barker and Rasmussen (1998): 234

⁴³ Prayon (1986): 182

⁴⁴ Bonfante (1986): 268

⁴⁵ Barker and Rasmussen (1998): 232

⁴⁶ Barker and Rasmussen (1998): 232

⁴⁷ Barker and Rasmussen (1998): 238

the afterlife explains the use in a mortuary context of any feature that was part of daily life because if the deceased needed something while alive they would continue to need it in the afterlife.

This leaves many questions unanswered. For one, it does not explain the period between the use of hut urns and the use of these house-like tombs, when simple chamber tombs and beehive tombs dominated the funerary record⁴⁸, nor does it explain why the tendency to replicate domestic structures was replaced by one-room chamber tombs at the end of the sixth century BCE.⁴⁹ It is unclear why the miniaturized features become full-sized – it has been proposed that this is part of a trend in which family burials superseded individual burials, and eventually a transition toward even larger group burials possibly representing clans rather than families.⁵⁰ If this is the case, there seems to be a dramatic shift from the association of the house with an individual elite male toward an association with the family as a whole.

Furthermore, scholars have failed to adequately address why the hut urns develop into this large-scale mortuary tradition in Etruria but not in Latium, although hut urns were quite prevalent in both regions. One explanation that has been put forth is that the prevalence of tufa in Etruria led to this increase in scale, while Latium does not have the same abundance of this soft, carvable stone. This explanation is not sufficient, first because the first larger scale tombs were not made out of tufa, and second because central and northern Etruria are, like Latium, also tufa-poor areas and they still had large scale tombs built out of stone blocks.⁵¹ Additionally, no matter how easy tufa is to carve relative to other materials, these large scale tombs are clearly a much

⁴⁸ Prayon (1986): 174

⁴⁹ Prayon (1986): 182

⁵⁰ Barker and Rasmussen (1998): 234

⁵¹ Prayon (1986): 180

more significant investment of time and resources than an individual cremation burial. If, as it is often argued, the domestically-modelled funerary architecture of the Etruscans represents a religious and social focus on the afterlife which was unique to their culture and was not as prevalent in Latium, how can it have developed from a funerary practice that was common to both Latium and Etruria (and in fact, according to Brown, likely originated in Latium)?⁵²

Perhaps, as we have seen in Bradley's article, these objects carried or developed different socially symbolic meaning in the two regions despite their formal similarities. More research should be done comparing the hut urns and their associated *corredo* from both regions. While some comparisons have been done, they have primarily focused on whether the differences in the shapes of the urns reflect regional variations in actual huts.⁵³ Although it has long been assumed that Latial and Etruscan hut urns were part of the same cultural trend, more work should be done to see whether they were serving the same symbolic function in each region, or whether Ridgway's emphasis on "variations in the local (family?) traditions" should be taken even further.⁵⁴

As with the other approaches to the study of hut urns, Prayon's focus on the religious connotations of these objects again neglects to examine what these urns can tell us about the huts themselves beyond their physical structure. This is particularly complicated with respect to Etruscan religious beliefs because the hut urns are largely invoked in discussions of later Etruscan funerary contexts to demonstrate that there is precedent for the domestic imagery in the larger scale tombs. Because some of these tombs represent what we now call huts (like the Tomb of the Thatched Roof) while some are imitations of true 'houses', the line between the two is

⁵² Brown (1976): 7

⁵³ Bartoloni et al. (1985)

⁵⁴ Ridgway (1990): 355

somewhat blurred in the study of funerary architecture because these tombs are so close stylistically and chronologically. The line between what we now call ‘hut’ and ‘house’ in these domestic-shaped structures is so tenuous that whatever symbolism and complexity one would assign to the latter, one must also give to the former. As with the hut urns, without the textual evidence available for later periods it is difficult to say what symbolism exactly is attached to these representations of huts and houses in 7th and 6th century Etruria, but they are clearly something more than shelter or there would not be such a significant investment in reproducing these structures for the mortuary context.

Social Interpretations

Scholars of Latium, primarily interested in how Iron Age society leads to Roman culture, have largely focused on the social implications of hut urns and their reflection of social stratification and the structure of Iron Age society. The social interpretations of hut urns and their associated *corredo* have been extensively studied and generally accepted to the point where Cornell claims that “the symbolic function of this complex of objects is evident enough.”⁵⁵ Cornell’s summary of the interpretations of *corredo* is twofold: “it signifies the passage of the dead person from one life to another, and provides him with the equipment he needs for day-to-day existence and for the performance of his social roles in the community.”⁵⁶ Cornell thinks that two social roles are being especially emphasized by the *corredo*: the deceased’s status as a

⁵⁵ Cornell (1995): 52

⁵⁶ Cornell (1995): 52

warrior, which is symbolized by the weapons; and his role as the head of household, symbolized by the hut-urn.⁵⁷

The connection between the urn and the individual's role in society is seen often in Iron Age Italian archaeology, and is not limited exclusively to hut urns. Another form of urn, the biconical urn, has long been viewed as a physical representation of the deceased because it mirrors elements of a human form, particularly in the case of those examples which are closed with helmets or clay imitations of helmets (see Figure 9).⁵⁸ These urns are seen as both an expression of the individual's elite warrior status as well as a loose stand-in for the body of the deceased, which is contained within the vessel. Lucy Shipley takes this basic analysis a step further by demonstrating the representation of both communal and individual identity by the burial vessel. The individual's membership within the larger community was emphasized through the body of the urn, through both the common form of the vessel and the decoration of the vessel, which often followed local trends.⁵⁹ The specific identity of the individual was expressed more fully through the cover, showing more differentiation and an interest in the personal funerary identity of the deceased.⁶⁰ It is clear from Shipley's analysis (among others) that the inhabitants of Central Italy in the Early Iron Age were using their urns to express the identity of the deceased and also negotiate their relationship to the wider community in death, a practice that certainly includes the use of hut urns.

One of the primary sites for Iron Age burials in Latium is Osteria dell'Osa, a cemetery near the north-western edge of the Alban Hills. The cemetery was excavated in the 1970s and

⁵⁷ Cornell (1995): 52

⁵⁸ Bartoloni (2013): 86

⁵⁹ Shipley (2016): 65, 70

⁶⁰ Shipley (2016): 69-70

80s, and by the end of the 1986 season, 600 graves had been excavated.⁶¹ The aim of these excavations was based on the idea that “cemeteries may provide significant information about the structure and organization of the corresponding communities.”⁶² When the excavators were interpreting the graves and grave goods, therefore, their priority was in drawing conclusions about social organization rather than expanding our understanding of the Iron Age house and the way inhabitants interacted with it. Nevertheless, their analysis can be applied to this end.

The studies of Osteria dell’Osa are exemplary because Bietti Sestieri’s interpretations account for the fact that her material is from a funerary context and therefore should be contextualized as grave goods. This marks a significant advance from the previous approaches of using hut urns as models for real huts, by acknowledging that these objects served an important ideological function in their original context. Archaeological theory for dealing with mortuary contexts developed throughout the 1970s and 80s while Osteria dell’Osa was being excavated and the development of this ‘archaeology of death’ was very influential on the project.⁶³ As John O’Shea explains, mortuary evidence is particularly valuable because it “represents the direct and purposeful culmination of conscious behavior, rather than its incidental residue,” and it can therefore be uniquely useful for understanding a culture’s beliefs and practices.⁶⁴ Much of the early archaeology of death theory arose from Binford’s arguments that through a systematic study of the material record, archaeologists can explore more than the technology and economy of past societies and begin to understand more intangible elements of culture. These early

⁶¹ Bietti Sestieri (1992): 79

⁶² Bietti Sestieri (1992): 78

⁶³ See Chapman and Randsborg (1981) for an early ‘archaeology of death’ approach.

⁶⁴ O’Shea (1981): 39

theorists termed this type of study of material culture “social analysis”, and it has been vital for taking the study of mortuary evidence beyond defining ‘culture groups’ and tracing ‘fashions’.⁶⁵

Bietti Sestieri lays out the primary elements of the ‘archaeology of death’ approach that had the greatest effect on the Osteria dell’Osa project, which can be summed up with the idea that funerary practices, including ceremonies and rituals, have two primary social goals. The first goal is “allowing the transition of the deceased from the world of the living to the world of the dead,” which consists of a liminal period that is thought in many societies to be dangerous for the living.⁶⁶ The second goal is “re-integrating the community after the loss it suffered from the death of one of its members.”⁶⁷ By incorporating these two goals into our analysis of funerary contexts, it becomes clear that graves and grave goods “would reflect *not* the realities of the people buried in them, but images of their lives and of their role in society in the minds of those arranging the burial and participating in the ritual.”⁶⁸

By contextualizing these objects within their mortuary sphere, our understanding of the *corredo* becomes more nuanced. The miniaturized weapons have received the bulk of the attention for these approaches, as Bietti Sestieri describes them as “the category of funerary goods most likely to be informative on the subject” of personal possessions that relate to the transition to the world of the dead.⁶⁹ She notes that the weapons were faithful imitations of real weapons: the swords were T-hilt types which were typical for the region and period and had sheaths, and spear-heads and knives had traces of wooden handles. From this evidence, Bietti

⁶⁵ Chapman and Randsborg (1981): 6-7

⁶⁶ Bietti Sestieri (1992): 10

⁶⁷ Bietti Sestieri (1992): 10

⁶⁸ Härke (1994): 32

⁶⁹ Bietti Sestieri (1992): 119

Sestieri argues that “the weapons, as well as the other grave-goods in these burials, apparently were meant to be functional in every detail except size.”⁷⁰ She suggests that the reason miniaturized weapons were used in these burials rather than real weapons (which were entirely absent from graves) has to do with the perceived danger of the liminal period in which the deceased passes to the world of the dead, during which the deceased has not yet reached the next world and can pose a threat to the living.⁷¹ Bietti Sestieri is likely correct to reject the alternative assumption that miniaturized weapons represent a scarcity of metal, since as she rightly notes female burials from the period have significant amounts of bronze ornaments.⁷² However, while Bietti Sestieri’s explanation accounts for the miniaturization of the weapons it is less convincing for the other miniaturized objects: full-sized pots would seem to pose no threat to the living. I would hypothesize that the miniaturization arose out of necessity with the hut urns out of a desire to reproduce the house but the impracticality of a full-scale imitation, and then spread to the other objects within the *corredo*.⁷³ While full-scale objects in graves could often be objects manufactured for everyday use, these miniaturized objects were necessarily created specifically for the funerary (or otherwise ritual) context.

Through cremation, the body itself is dramatically reduced in scale. Because of the design of the hut urns there is no removable lid through which to inter the cremains, unlike the contemporaneous biconical urns. Instead, the deceased, in cremated form, must enter the miniaturized hut through the door opening, just as he did in life. In this way the hut urn serves as

⁷⁰ Bietti Sestieri (1992): 119

⁷¹ Bietti Sestieri (1992): 119-20

⁷² Bietti Sestieri (1992): 120

⁷³ To better understand the purpose of miniaturization in these graves, more research should be done into the chronological development of the *corredo* in order to understand what elements within it emerged first and with which objects the miniaturization emerged.

the eternal house of the deceased. The potter could easily have indicated the door and other openings such as windows through incised decoration rather than through actual holes, but the choice was made instead to create openings, which allow some level of permeability even when the clay door is inserted and held in place (see Fig. 10). The desire for this opening superseded the need for the vessel to serve as a spill-proof container for the cremains. The form of the vessel forces both the deceased and the living person or people who handle the cremains to interact physically with the vessel as though it is a small structure, not simply a vessel for holding the cremains. As Susan Stewart discusses in her chapter on miniaturization, “the reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday world.”⁷⁴ In this way the miniaturized hut urn serves as the perfect funerary object, “transcend[ing] the duration of everyday life” to serve as the eternal home for the deceased.⁷⁵

None of the above interpretations are inconsistent with the majority of Bietti Sestieri’s interpretations, though she has very little to say about hut urns themselves, noting primarily that they were “probably relatively faithful reproductions of actual huts.”⁷⁶ Otherwise her discussion focuses on the other elements of the *corredo*. Based on the limited examples of statuettes in graves, particularly grave 142, Bietti Sestieri argues that the statuette is a representation of the deceased, and from the placement of the other grave goods (the fibula, weapons and knife were placed directly on top of the statuette in grave 142) she argues that they represent the personal belongings of the deceased. Again, though, she is careful to emphasize that the grave goods “constituted the complete set of objects the deceased would need for his new life in the afterworld, in which he would exist in a form totally different from the previous world,” not his

⁷⁴ Stewart (1984): 65

⁷⁵ Stewart (1984): 66

⁷⁶ Bietti Sestieri (1992): 50

belongings in life.⁷⁷ This is a place where Bietti Sestieri misses the opportunity to bring the hut urn into her discussion.

If, as she and others suggest, the objects in the grave represent the objects that the deceased will need in the next life, then the obvious question is why a house is one of these necessary objects.⁷⁸ The simple explanation, that houses were simply considered necessary for survival, is not sufficient, because these objects are not present in all graves, not even all elite graves. The objects in the *corredo* seem to represent not just the objects the deceased will need for survival in the next life, but the objects they will need, as Cornell says, “for the performance of his social roles in the community”⁷⁹ in the afterlife. Cornell quite explicitly links this to a head of household identity.⁸⁰ While it is impossible to say with the current evidence whether this represents a social role of head of household like that which had developed by the Republican period, there does seem to be compelling evidence for some version of an elite male role related to the house. Some amount of his elite status seems to be related to the house in the same way that some of it derives from his status as a warrior.

While Bietti Sestieri does not touch upon the significance of the hut urn in her entire volume on Osteria dell’Osa (1992), she does touch on it quite briefly in a short section on the cemetery within a larger volume on Italian hut urns.⁸¹ In this earlier piece, Bietti Sestieri suggests that the use of hut urns represents the deceased’s identity in life as the “*titolare della*

⁷⁷ Bietti Sestieri (1992): 122

⁷⁸ “This concept of the tomb or tomb monument as the hut or house of the dead is reflected already by the cinerary urns of the Villanovan period imitating the structures of the dwelling huts of the deceased, leaving them within their usual environments and furnishing them with everything they liked and which could be useful for their Afterlife.” Steingraber (2013): 663

⁷⁹ Cornell (1995): 52

⁸⁰ Cornell (1995): 52

⁸¹ Bartoloni et al. (1987)

casa".⁸² While we should be cautious to ascribe any identity in life based on funerary goods due to the complexities mentioned above, I believe Bietti Sestieri is on a fruitful path with this identification, which she unfortunately did not expand upon further in her own book. The difficulty, as Bietti Sestieri has encountered, lies in teasing out this head of household status in life from the representations we have from a mortuary context. We should be hesitant to ascribe this head-of-household identity to any one individual based on grave goods alone. However, the fact that this was an identity that could be held by a deceased man suggests that it had some basis in identities held in life: it was a role that existed in Iron Age Italian society, regardless of whether the particular individual in a hut urn had truly held it while alive.

While the significance of the hut urns is touched upon too briefly in scholarship, the implications for the huts themselves is entirely ignored. For an elite man's identity to be related to his house, the house itself must mean more to him and his community than mere walls and a roof. If the miniaturized model of a house is representing some sort of head of household (or *titolare della casa*) status, then it is standing not just for the physical structure of the house but for the household over which he holds sway. Even if it does not stand for the human members of the household, it represents the dominion which he rules. If the social role of *dominus* was not formed by this time, it was clearly emerging, and was from this early age deeply tied to the house.

Conclusions

Ultimately, there is no conflict between the broad assumptions that hut urns represent on the one hand the nascent social identity of the *dominus* and on the other a religious focus on the afterlife in which a domestic representation is an important part of providing for the dead and

⁸² Bietti Sestieri (1987): 194

their passage to the next world. However, because hut urns have long been approached from such specific angles their interpretations have been overly focused on one analysis to the exclusion of a breadth of other evidence. All of the varied approaches to hut urns lead up to, but seem reluctant to acknowledge, the conclusion that they were complex and multifaceted objects without a singular meaning, and that the huts they represented carried significant social and/or religious symbolism for the people who lived in them.

As Pierre Bourdieu illustrated in his article “The Berber house or the world reversed”, structures that might appear simple or primitive to a modern Western eye can contain a great deal of meaning within their cultural context.⁸³ Bourdieu’s study of the Kabyle house is quite separate from Iron Age Italian huts in time and space and we should expect the cultural meaning of the house to be quite different for a 20th century Berber and a 9th century BCE Latin. The importance of Bourdieu’s study is in demonstrating the cultural significance that can be imbued in a domestic structure, from its construction to its layout and use. Bourdieu had the opportunity to explore some of this meaning due to his access to both the Berber house and its inhabitants. Reconstructing this significance for the early Iron Age in Italy is made exceptionally difficult due to the lack of textual evidence and scarcity of archaeological evidence. It is for this reason that the hut urns are such a valuable collection of evidence, which ought to be looked at not just from isolated perspectives in order to understand other aspects of the Iron Age, but as a group of objects worthy of detailed study in their own right which can tell us much about their own significance and the significance of the objects they represent.

⁸³ Bourdieu (1970)

FIGURES



Figure 1

A hut urn containing the cremains of the deceased

<http://www.ou.edu/class/ahi4163/slides/005.jpg>



Figure 2
Examples of pottery from Osteria dell'Osa

Bietti Sestieri (1992): 96



Figure 3
Examples of razors, spears, and knives from Osteria dell'Osa

Bietti Sestieri (1992): 95



Figure 4
Examples of swords from Osteria dell'Osa

Bietti Sestieri (1992): 97



Figure 5
Example of *corredo* within a dolium

Cornell (1995): 50 after Boëthius (1970): 14



Figure 6
Remains of huts from the Palatine Hill

Boëthius (1970): 22

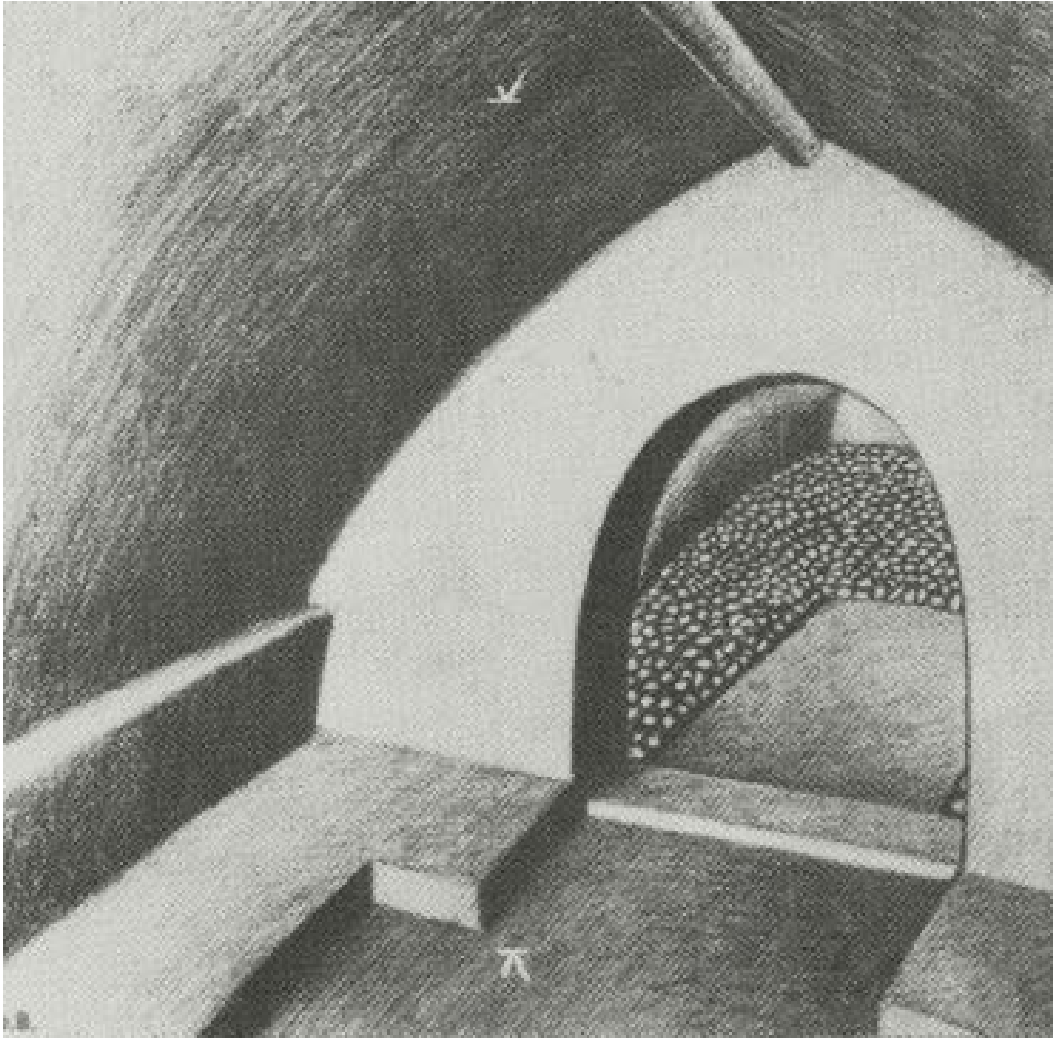


Figure 7
Tomb of the Thatched Roof

Prayon (1986): 183



Figure 8
Tomb of the Reliefs, Caere

<http://www.toledomuseum.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Tomb-Ceverteri.jpg>



Figure 9
Biconical Urn with associated grave goods from Tarquinia

Bartoloni (2013): 87



Figure 10
Hut urn with holes for closure

http://www.livius.org/site/assets/files/43292/hut-urn_villanova_apm.jpg

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