SAILING FURTHER THE DEATH: A LIMINAL DIVINITY IN THE ETRUSCAN TOMB OF THE INSCRIPTIONS?

The following work focuses on the analysis and interpretation of an alleged sacrifice scene painted on one of the walls of the Tomb of the Inscriptions in Tarquinia, located at the necropolis of Monterozzi and dating back to the last quarter of the 6th century BC. Three painted doors, distributed between the back wall and the side walls, mark the phases of the passage of the deceased: after the conclusion of the funeral games organized by the living, the deceased prepares to cross the extreme threshold – symbolized by the false door on the back wall – through a travel recalled by corteges of knights and comasts, in a real and imaginary context at the same time. The moment of the detachment of the deceased from the living dimension could be identified in the scene painted on the entrance wall: a young man lays a fish on a support (perhaps a grid or an altar) placed at his feet and in the presence of a naked character with a big phallus and with a stick in his hand, who presides over the ritual. Above the scene, there is a titulus pictus in scriptio continua and in the right-handed direction.

If the gesture of the young man is clear, the meaning of the sacrifice or consumption of fish in a funerary context and the identity of the character with the big phallus still remain uncertain and controversial.

Through an analysis and a comparison between literary and iconographic sources, this study has tried to give an identity to what is thought to be a liminal divinity, whose probable psychopomp function it could be conditioned by the rite of the immolation of fish, sacrifice often necessary to guarantee to the deceased the extreme transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead and performed in rituals dedicated to ithyphallic divinities not extraneous to the Etruscan religion, like Hermes or Dionysus, Gods of travels, frontiers, fishermen and sailors.

The close connection between the journey by sea and the “last journey” of the deceased, very widespread in the funeral imagery of the Etruscans and many ancient peoples, could provide a key to interpreting the figured scene: the sea, imagined as a liminal space and fraught with dangers, it must be crossed by the deceased to reach the afterlife and the sacrifice of a fish in honor of a liminal divinity and connected with water and with navigation will be able to guarantee the journey a favorable outcome.