From Physical Experience to Spiritual Salvation: Swimming as a Rite-de- Passage in Etruscan Funerary Art

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Abstract:

This study explores the symbolism of swimming and the concept of passage in Etruscan funerary art, drawing on Orphic and Pythagorean thought. Both philosophies view death as a transitional phase rather than an end and see water as a medium of purification and a means of achieving a higher state of existence. This belief is reflected in the various funerary symbols representing the transition between the worlds of the living and the dead. These symbols include false doors, boats, music, scenes of swimming, and funerary banquets, which together create a visual language of spiritual renewal and salvation.

In Pythagorean philosophy, water symbolizes purification and moral cleansing, while swimming represents the soul's effort to liberate itself from the body. In Orphic belief, diving and crossing water signify a purifying rite that precedes union with the divine. Consequently, swimming in Etruscan funerary art is depicted not as a physical or athletic activity, but as a spiritual metaphor for the soul's release from material existence and its ascent toward immortality.

As funerary imagery evolved, this symbolism shifted from depictions of crossing water by boat to free swimming, marking a visual and philosophical transformation—from a passive journey guided by external forces, like Charon and his boat, to an inner voyage driven by the purified self. Thus, in Etruscan and Roman art, water emerges as a cosmic threshold between life and death, serving as a medium for spiritual transformation and eternal liberation.

Key words: Pythagorean, Swimming, rite-de-passage, eschatology, Orphic, purification.

«من الممارسة الرياضية إلى الخلاص الروحي: السباحة كطقس عبور في الفن الجنائزي الإتروسكي»

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ملخص:
يتناول هذا البحث رمزية السباحة وفعل العبور في الفنون الجنائزية الإتروسكية، في ضوء الفكرين الأورفي والفيثاغوري، حيث يشترك كلا المذهبين في رؤية الموت كمرحلة انتقالية لا كنهاية، وفي اعتبار الماء وسيلة للتطهير والعبور نحو حالة روحية أسمى. تتجلّى هذه الفكرة في تعدّد الرموز الجنائزية التي تعكس طقس الانتقال بين عالمي الأحياء والموتى، مثل الأبواب الوهمية، والمراكب، والموسيقى، ومشاهد السباحة والمآدب الجنائزية، والتي شكّلت مجتمعة لغة فنية تعبّر عن الخلاص الروحي والتجدّد. في الفكر الفيثاغوري، تُعدّ المياه رمزًا للتطهر والنقاء، والسباحة تجسيدًا للجهد الشخصي للنفس في رحلتها نحو التحرر من الجسد، بينما يرى الفكر الأورفي أن الغوص والعبور عبر الماء يمثلان الطقس التطهيري السابق للاتحاد بالعالم الإلهي. ومن ثمّ، لم تعد السباحة في الفن الجنائزي الإتروسكي فعلًا جسديًا أو نشاطًا دنيويًا، بل رمزًا روحانيًا للتحرر من المادة والانطلاق إلى الخلود. ومع تطور الفنون الجنائزية، انتقلت هذه الرمزية من مشهد العبور بالمركب إلى مشهد السباحة الحرة، في تحوّل فني وفلسفي يعكس تطوّر مفهوم الموت من عبور قسري تقوده قوى خارجية (مثل خارون ومركبه)، إلى رحلة داخلية يقودها الجسد نفسه كرمز للنفس المتطهّرة. وهكذا أصبحت المياه في الفن الإتروسكي والروماني وسيطًا كونيًا بين الحياة والموت، ومعبرًا للتحوّل الروحي والانعتاق الأبدي.

كلمات مفتاحية: السباحة، التطهير، طقس المرور، الفيثاغورية، الأورفية، علم الآخرة، المركب.

1-Introduction

Swimming played a central role in ancient life, serving as both a physical activity and a symbolically charged practice with religious and social significance. In Italy, particularly within Etruscan and Roman civilizations, depictions of swimming ranged from everyday activities to funerary symbolism. While the Romans largely viewed swimming as a recreational pursuit beneficial for health and education, Etruscan art often presented it within funerary contexts, symbolizing notions of passage and immortality.

Etruscan representations of swimming and water immersion act as visual metaphors for the soul's journey, echoing the Charonian myth in which water mediates between life and death, as well as between the material and spiritual realms. These images also resonate with Orphic mysticism, reflecting the interconnectedness of life and death as continuous movements within an eternal rhythm. As Gaston Bachelard noted in 1983, water is "the element of continual birth," capable of both destruction and regeneration, embodying purification and transcendence[1]. Similarly, Mircea Eliade (1958) interpreted immersion as a "symbolic return to the formless," a necessary stage for the recreation of a purified being[2].

As a result, swimming across this liminal space reflects the Orphic process of separation, transition, and reintegration, with each movement echoing Orpheus' mythic descent to reclaim life. Victor Turner's concept of liminality sheds light on how these watery passages extend beyond funerary contexts, representing transformation itself, which aligns with Orphic metempsychosis and the cyclical journey of the soul[3]. C. G. Jung described water as "the maternal womb of life and rebirth," where the unconscious connects with the cosmic source; the swimmer embodies this archetypal reconciliation, transforming the tomb into a metaphysical space of renewal[4].

In a similar vein, Heidi Mohamed Bayoumy, in her 2025 study of theatre for adolescents and young adults, demonstrates how water symbolizes liminality and structures psychological and social transitions through three stages derived from van

[1]Gaston Bachelard, Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter. Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983, 6.

[2] Eliade Mircea. The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958, 188.

[3] Victor Turner, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure. Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969, 97.

[4] Jung, C. G. Man and His Symbols. New York: Doubleday, 1956, 43.

Gennep [1] : pre-liminal (separation from former identity), liminal (water as an intermediate symbolic space), and post-liminal (integration into a new identity). Water serves simultaneously as a backdrop and essential element in the transitional ritual, facilitating the passage from the past to a new state and acting as a "border place" where conflict and diversity allow for the emergence of transformed selves[2].

Brandt as well argues that this tripartite structure can be understood in the Etruscan funerary paintings and the golden tablets through Van Genip's framework of rites of passage; the process involves a series of transitions beginning with separation from the initial state, followed by an intermediate transitional phase, and ending with a return to a new, more stable state[3].

The Etruscan voyage begins with death and the subsequent departure of the soul (*hinthial*). This soul then embarks on a journey through the Afterlife before reaching its final destination in the true Underworld. The tomb paintings, which focus on this journey, reveal several striking elements: the soul is depicted traveling in various ways—on horseback, in a wagon, by boat, or on foot. It is often accompanied or protected by different beings, including marine creatures, hippocamps, snakes, snake-footed figures, and guardian demons[4].

Stones and bodies of water often act as markers that define the boundaries between different regions of the Underworld. Meanwhile, doors—regardless of whether they are open, closed, or partially ajar—and boats serve as visual indicators of points of entry or means of crossing these thresholds[5].

Collectively, these interpretations highlight water as both a literal and symbolic medium through which ancient and theatrical representations conceptualize the journey of transformation, renewal, and the soul's movement toward transcendence.

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[1] Arnold van Gennep, The Rites of Passage. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960, 146-165.

[2] Heidi Mohamed Bayoumy, "Crossing the Threshold by/around Water: A Critical Reading of the Liminal Experiences of Adolescents and Young Adults in Feeding the Moonfish and Our Place." Children's Literature in Education 56 (2025): 176-179.

[3] Brandt J.R. 2015: "Passage to the underworld. Continuity or change in Etruscan funerary ideology and practices (6th-2nd Centuries BC)?", in J.R. Brandt, M. Prusac, H. Roland (eds.), Death and changing rituals. Function and meaning in ancient funerary practices, 113, 149

[4] Torjussen, S. (2023). Journeys to the Underworld: A comparative analysis of Etruscan tomb paintings and the "Orphic" gold tablets of Southern Italy in the fourth century BC. ACTA – Ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia, Vol. 36 (New Series 23), 9–32, university of Oslo, 204

[5] Torjussen, S., 2023, 204

The visual language of Etruscan funerary painting articulates the concepts of Orphic mysticism—specifically, the liberation of the soul through watery passages—via movement, rhythm, and aquatic imagery. The depictions of swimmers, divers, or floating figures in tomb scenes serve as emblems of transition, representing a body in motion that occupies an intermediate space between two realms. According to Victor Turner's theory of communitas, the liminal individual exists "in a state of potentiality, a state of pure being in motion, freed from structure"[1]. In this manner, the swimming figure emerges as a visual manifestation of the Orphic notion of spiritual release, signifying the moment when the soul transcends the physical domain and enters a state of divine unity.

In the Tomb of the Diver (Paestum, ca. 480 BCE), the youth suspended above the dark water exemplifies this metaphysical threshold. His leap transcends a mere act of physical daring; it represents a symbolic descent into the eternal element. Scholars such as Steingräber (2006) and Holloway (1991) have noted that Etruscan and South Italian funerary art often employs this motif to signify the passage into the afterlife. The diver's body serves as a bridge between vertical and horizontal planes, connecting the realms of sky and water—heaven and underworld—in a singular gesture of transcendence. The movement of his limbs, both stretched and balanced, conveys a sense of harmony and release, resonating with the Orphic idea of the soul's return to its cosmic origin.

The motifs surrounding Etruscan tombs—such as fish, dolphins, and water birds—function as potent symbols of transition rather than mere decorative embellishments. The dolphin, traditionally associated with Dionysus and later with Orpheus, operates as a psychopomp, guiding the soul across the watery boundary. As Eliade points out, "symbols of navigation and swimming often express the passage from one mode of being to another" [2]. In contrast, the bird symbolizes the liberated soul, now detached from the material world, while the fish signifies regeneration and the continuity of life. Collectively, these motifs construct a visual theology of rebirth, wherein water signifies both grave and womb, embodying cycles of destruction and renewal.

The compositions of Etruscan tomb paintings frequently emphasize fluid lines and rhythmic contours that evoke the motion of waves. This visual rhythm parallels what Bachelard describes as "the poetic psychology of water," which underscores its capacity to mirror the depths of the psyche and suggest the endless flow of life and

[1] Turner 1969, 105.
[2] Eliade 1958, 193.

transformation[1]. In this context, the Etruscan painter does not merely depict water; rather, they invoke its metaphysical quality, transforming the tomb's surface into a symbolic portal. The rendered water possesses dynamism, radiating the unseen energy of passage, thereby echoing the Orphic belief in cyclical return and eternal renewal.

Ultimately, the swimmer illustrated in Etruscan art personifies the Orphic soul—the entity that, through immersion and movement, achieves purification, rebirth, and divine reunion. The painted scene thus functions as a ritual space, a visual representation of motion and transformation that embodies the sacred logic of the Orphic body in motion. Through these visual metaphors, Etruscan funerary art transcends the concept of mortality, transforming the walls of the tomb into hymns of perpetual life, articulated in the silent language of water.

2- **Swimming in Etruscan Society**

Despite the advancements of Etruscan society in architecture and the arts, evidence of swimming as a daily activity is limited. No architectural structures specifically designed for swimming, such as pools or ponds, have been discovered back before the first century BC[2], in contrast to what is known from Roman civilization[3]. Additionally, ancient texts do not provide clear references to swimming as a public or training activity[4]. This lack of evidence may be attributed to cultural factors, particularly the conservative Etruscan attitude toward the body and nudity. This perspective is reflected in their art, where the naked body was only depicted in limited, symbolic contexts[5].

Artistic studies indicate that the Etruscans viewed the body as something to be covered in public settings, including in both sports and funerary contexts. This perspective makes communal or public swimming unlikely. Larissa Bonfante has noted that the lack of nudity in Etruscan art reflects a broader social attitude toward the body. She argues that nude representations were generally limited to children, slaves, or specific ritual circumstances[6].

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[1] Gaston Bachelard, Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter. Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983, 15.

2 Sawula, L. W., Physical activities of the Etruscan civilization (Unpublished master's thesis). Faculty of Physical Education, University of Alberta, Edmonton 1969, 174.

3 Richardson 1992, 292 also Rogers 2018, Ebolese & Brutto, 2020, Rook, 2008.

4 Bevagna, G., Etruscan sport. In D. Kyle & P. Christesen (Eds.), A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons 2014, 395-411.

5 Bonfante L., Nudity as a costume in classical art. AJA, 93(4), 1989, 545.

[6] Bonfante 1989, 543-545.

Dio Cassius noted that Gaius Maecenas, of Etruscan origin[1], was the first to construct a warm-water pool in Rome[2], situated within his renowned gardens (Horti Maecenatis) on the Esquiline Hill, during the first century BC[3].

At Paestum, there are two rectangular baths with partial roofs. The first bath is connected to a gymnasium and is often regarded as a cistern[4]. In the center of this bath is a large pool in the Greek style, which dates before 79 BC. This bath was later filled in and transformed into a cistern to help with drainage in the area[5]. The second bath is situated within a Hellenistic house[6].

According to Pliny the Younger (61–113 AD) in his "Epistulae", specifically Letter 52 to Domitius Apollinaris, his villa in Tuscany included two swimming pools. He described one as cold (frigidarium) and the other as warm (calidarium or piscina calida). Although the villa was not directly on the coast, it was positioned so that bathers could view the sea from the pool. Pliny noted that there was "no need for a cold pool because the sea is nearby." However, the cold pool was not merely for natural cooling; it served hygienic and cultural purposes within the villa's architectural design[7].

There is compelling evidence of swimming practices in Etruscan art, most notably in a bronze statue of a swimmer dating back to the early fifth century BC. This statue was discovered in Perugia and is now on display at the Glyptothek Museum in Munich. It captures the swimmer poised to dive into the water[8] (Fig. 1). Additionally,

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[1] He had a passion for poetry and art, was effeminate, and favored more handsome young men. He was seen as the left arm of Augustus and the right arm of Agrippa. Devore 2008, 124.

[2] Dio Cassius 55.7.6

[3] Dyson and Uhlig 2004, 45; Grant, and Scribner 1988, 1211; The New Encyclopaedia Britannica - Volume 11 -445 https://www.britannica.com/sports/swimming-sport

[4] The gymnasium was a vital part of Greek cities, serving as a hub for both physical and mental education, which together constituted the foundation of a sound education. It was connected to classrooms, corridors, storage areas, and changing rooms.

عبد اللطيف أحمد علي، مصادر التاريخ اليوناني، د ط، بيروت، ١٩٧٣، ٢٦٣،٢٦٤

[5] Coulsen 1976; Paestum: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0006%3Aalphabetic+letter%3DP%3Aentry+group%3D1%3Aentry%3Dpaestum

[6] Holloway, R. R. (1977). High flying at Paestum: A reply. AJA, 81(4), 1977, 554-555.

[7] *Epistulae* 52.

[8] Sawula 1969, Fig, 130, 147; Pallottino, M., The art of the Etruscans. London, United Kingdom: Thames and Hudson, 1955, pl.75; Sweet, Sweet, W. E., Sport and recreation in

another bronze statue of a swimmer, approximately 14.5 cm tall, also originates from the fifth century BC[1] (Fig. 2). The evidence of swimming is not limited to sculptures; wall depictions also showcase this swimming activity, which received relatively little attention in Etruscan art. For example, a fresco from the Fishing and Hunting tomb in Tarquinia[2], central Italy, dated to the late sixth century BC (circa 530 BC), illustrates a swimmer in a distinctive position, depicted as if swimming towards the water with their head down and feet up (Fig. 5). Similarly, a wall painting in the Tomb of the Diver at Paestum, dated around 475 BC, showcases a solitary diver in the same inverted position, head down and body extended towards the water[3] (Figs. 3-4).

The models available in the study depict two types of jumping. In the first and second examples swimming referred to, the swimmer begins from a standing position, with one leg placed on the edge of a rock or a high place. This leg is fixed to provide leverage for pushing off, while the other leg is raised off the ground and held parallel to it. In the two funeral swimming scenes the swimmer extends their arms forward and lowers their head. As the swimmer jumps, the arms enter the water first, followed by the head, and then the entire body[4]. This sequence is a significant symbol in

ancient Greece: A source book with translations. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, 165, pl.50.

[1] Harris, H.A., Sport in Greece and Rome. London: Thames and Hudson.1972, pl.55.

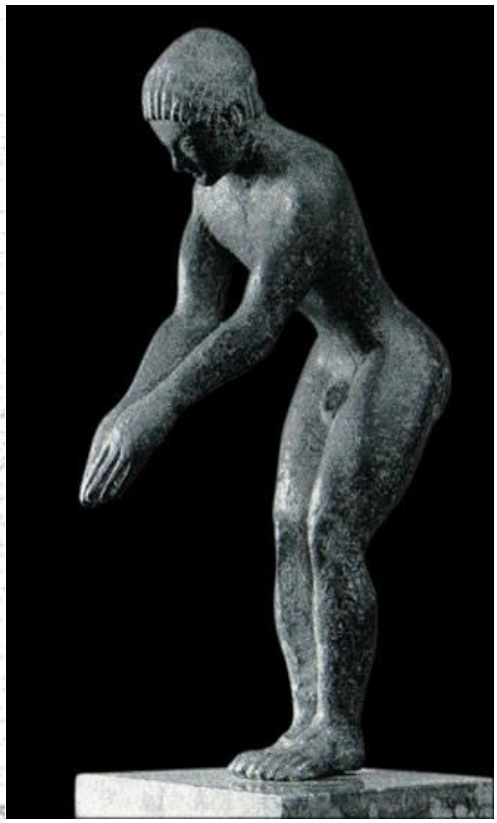
[2] Swindler,M.H., Ancient painting. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1929, fig.396

[3] Holloway 2006, 366, fig.1 & 372, fig.9

[4] There are two main types of jumping into the water in swimming: jumping in headfirst and jumping in feet first. “Jumping in Headfirst:” This technique requires self-confidence and courage from the swimmer. Typically, the swimmer stands at the edge of the pool, bending their torso forward while keeping their knees slightly bent and extending their arms behind their body. As they move their arms forward, it shifts their center of gravity. When the arms reach their highest point, they push off with their legs, ensuring that their head is positioned between their arms. The arms enter the water first, followed by the head, and then the entire body. Jumping in Feet First: In this technique, a beginner stands at the edge of the pool or on a rock from which they will jump, keeping their body straight and their arms positioned at their sides. One foot is placed forward on the edge of the pool, and they lean on it to push off. After pushing forward, the other leg comes forward to align parallel with the first leg. As the body enters the water, the swimmer kicks with both feet and pushes off with their hands, allowing them to surface easily. In another position, the swimmer may stand at the edge of the pool, bending their torso forward with arms extended forward and down, while keeping their head between their arms and pulling it towards their chest. The legs should be straight, although they may be bent slightly as depicted in the Etruscan bronze statue. After achieving the correct position, the swimmer pushes their legs toward the water, allowing the arms and head to enter first, followed by the rest of their body.

interpreting the scene of transformation and the ritual of crossing, which will be discussed in detail in the following pages.

(Fig.2)



(Fig.1)

قاسم حسن حسين، افتخار أحمد، مبادئ وأسس السباحة، دار الفكر للطباعة والنشر والتوزيع، ٢٠٠٠، ١٢٤.

Fig.3

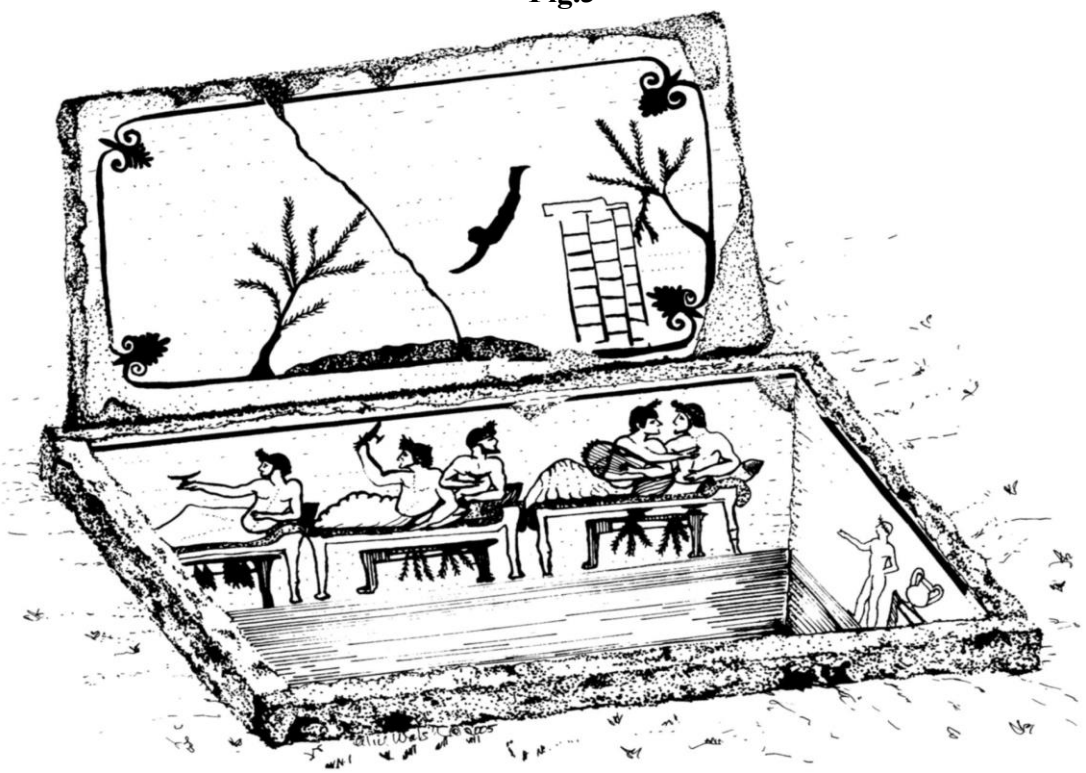


Fig.4

Fig.5

3- **Swimming in Roman Society**

Swimming was a common and accepted practice in daily life among the Romans, in contrast to the Etruscans. It was valued in various contexts, including social, educational, medical, and military settings. Roman literary sources emphasize the importance of swimming in the upbringing and education of children from an early age, along with other essential skills such as reading and rhetoric. This indicates that swimming was considered vital for the development of the ideal citizen. Quintilian, in his work "Institutio Oratoria", notes that swimming was one of the fundamental skills expected of young Romans, along with horse riding and oratory[1]. Children also engaged in informal and recreational activities, such as swimming, hunting, and boating, which did not involve large-scale competitions[2].

Swimming was extremely popular in ancient Rome, and numerous records demonstrate the Romans' fondness for the activity. They viewed swimming as a vital

[1] Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, I.1.12

[2] Papakonstantinou, Z. (Ed.) Sports in the cultures of the ancient world: New perspectives. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2010, 237.

component of military preparation, particularly due to their strong interest in war. It played a significant role in army training and was an important aspect of the military education program for young men in Rome. Swimming was commonly practiced in Roman society, especially along the Tiber River, near the temple complex dedicated to the god Mars, and in the pools found in Roman baths[1]. One of the most exquisite examples is the pool at the Baths of Caracalla, which was an open-air facility featuring bronze mirrors designed to reflect sunlight into the water[2]. The importance of swimming for soldiers was documented by Vegetius in his book "*De Re Militari*", where he emphasized it as essential for crossing rivers without relying on bridges[3].

In his works, Horace mentions how the young aristocrats of his time enjoyed bathing in rivers. He notes that Ananipius had no equal when it came to swimming upstream and describes how Neobule's beloved, Hebrus, would wash the oil from his shoulders in the river after exercising. In a satirical poem, Horace suggests that those suffering from insomnia should swim three times in the Tiber River. The bravery of Roman soldiers is exemplified in the conquest of Britain, as depicted in "Caesar Settles Britannia[4] . Additionally, Horace refers to the effectiveness and popularity of swimming, stating, "Whoever wants a sound sleep, let him swim three times in the Tiber[5].

Pliny describes a beach scene at Hippo in North Africa that could be reminiscent of a modern holiday resort. "People of all ages are there, enjoying activities like fishing, boating, and swimming. This is especially true for the boys, who have the leisure time to indulge in such pleasures. They compete to see who can swim the farthest out to sea, with the winner being the one who distances himself the most from the beach and his companions[6].

In early Rome, bathers commonly swam in the seas[7] and rivers[8]. The first known mention of a public pool, or "Piscina Publica", dates to 215 BC[9]. As the Roman

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[1] مروة مدني فؤاد حمادي، التطور التاريخي للعمارة الداخلية للصالات الرياضية عبر العصور، المجلة التربوية، كلية التربية جامعة حلوان، مجلد ٥٣، ٢٠١٨، ٧٦٨.

[2] مروة مدني فؤاد حمادي، ٢٠١٨، ٧٧١.

[3] Vegetius, De Re Militari, I.10.

[4] B.G. IV, 25

[5] Horace, sat. ii, 1,8

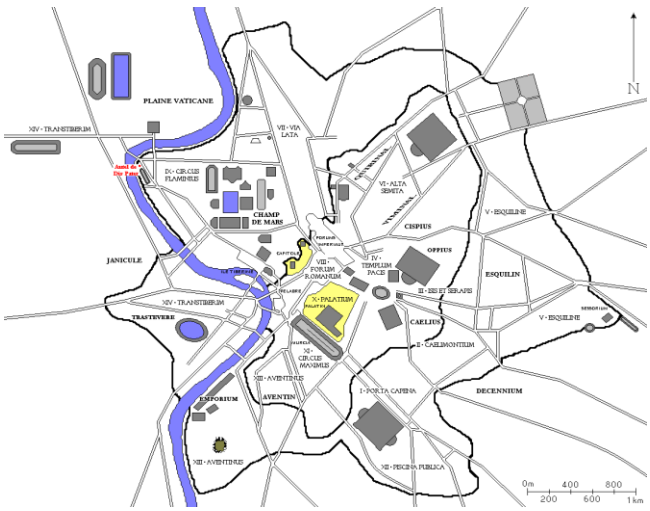
[6] Epistulae IX, 33

[7] Hdt. 8.89; Pl. Resp. 5.453d; Ar. Pint. 656ff

[8] Hom. Od. 6.210ff; Moschus 2.31

[9] Livy 23.32.4; Richardson Lawrence, A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, 292.

Empire became wealthier, public bathing facilities, also called “Piscina Publica”, were constructed during the Republican era[1], primarily in Administrative District 12 (Regio XII). The area became informally recognized as "Piscina Publica" due to this significant landmark. The pool was situated in a low-lying region between the Via Appia, the Servian Wall, and the northeastern slope of Aventine Hill, an area that would later be occupied by the Baths of Caracalla[2]. Festus declared the pool defunct in the 2nd century AD[3]. Additionally, it is reported that Emperor Trajan utilized traditional resources for funding, specifically for the reconstruction of the roof of a gymnasium with pool at Salamis in Cyprus after it had collapsed[4].



A map indicating the location of the swimming pool in Rome[5]

Roman artworks often depict bathers from the Roman period. One notable mosaic, preserved in the Bardo Museum in Tunis, shows a bather with his toe being bitten off by a crab, illustrating a humorous scene[6] (Fig. 6). Another mosaic, housed in the Louvre Museum, showcases a bather performing a free-swimming stroke resembling

[1] Richardson 1992, 332.
[2] Platner, S. B., & Ashby, T. A topographical dictionary of ancient Rome. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929, 391-392. LacusCurtius • Piscina Publica (Platner & Ashby, 1929)
[3] Festus. 213 (Verrius)
[4] Pouilloux, Roesch and Marcillet-Jaubert, 1987, Salamine de Chypre XIII, no. 38; Papakonstantinou 2010, 203.
[5] Piscina Publica - Wikipedia
[6] Harris 1972, fig. 56

the butterfly style. This piece, from the Baths of Neptune at Ostia, dates back to the first century BC[1] (Fig. 7).

In Book 34 of his "Natural History", Pliny the Elder discusses the most renowned bronze sculptors and mentions a work attributed to Eutychides, dating from the late fourth to early third century BC. This artwork depicted the Eurotas River, which flows through Laconia from north to south. It was described as having a fluidity that surpassed that of the river itself, with ancient critics stating, "The artist's art seemed more fluid than the river itself" (in quo artem ipso amne liquidiorem plurimi dixere[2]). Although Eutychides' original work has not survived, many later artworks have depicted the Eurotas River. Notably, a bronze statue preserved in the Louvre[3] (Fig. 8) may represent the Orontes River or could simply be a portrayal of a young swimmer without any specific river association[4].

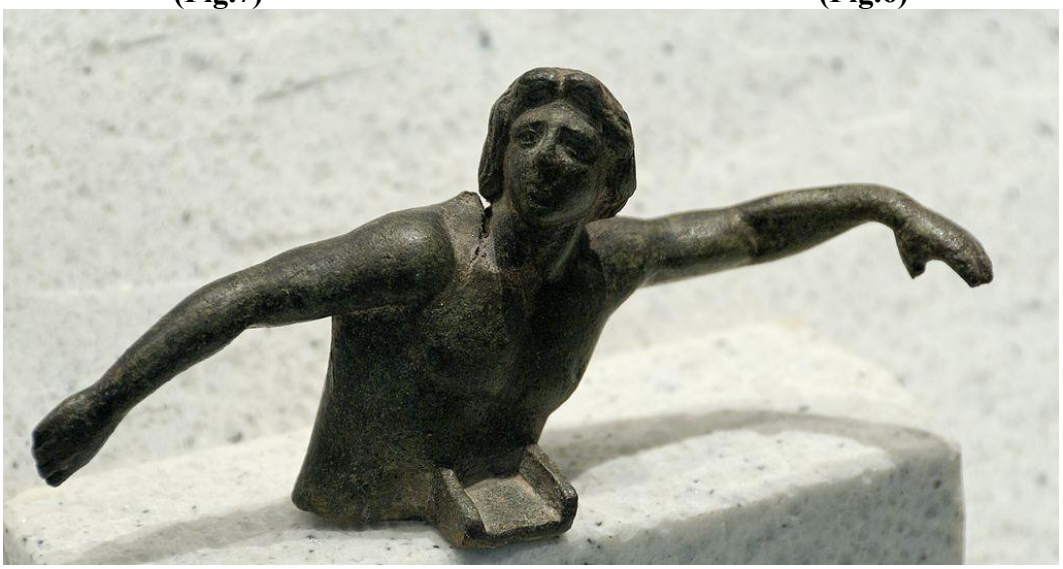
[1] J.T. Bakker, *The Buildings in Ostia (Topographical Dictionary)* Regio II - Insula IV - Terme di Nettuno (II,IV,2) (Baths of Neptune) last accessed 10/10/2025

[2] C. Plini Secundi Naturalis historiae libri XXXVII, C. Mayhoff (ed.), vol. 5: Libri XXXI–XXXVII, Lipsiae
1897, 189–190

[3] online catalogue of the Louvre collections, inv. MNE 30 statuette - Louvre site des collections last accessed 10/10/2025; Tahberer 2003, 24–25 (figs. 1–2).

[4] Skrzyniarz 2024, 46.

(Fig.7)[1] **(Fig.6)**



(Fig.8)

During his campaign in Egypt, Julius Caesar once swam 200 yards, carrying important papers above the surface in his left hand and dragging his cloak behind him with his teeth to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. Augustus personally taught his grandson how to write, swim, and other basics[2], reminiscent of the Greek proverb: He does not know how to write or swim, which expresses ignorance, as cited by Plato and Diogenes[3].

Plutarch notes that Cato the Elder was very dedicated to teaching his son various skills, including javelin throwing, fencing, horse riding, and swimming in both cold and hot water. He also instructed him on navigating the challenging and easy areas of the Tiber River[4]. However, Plutarch mentions that Cato refused to swim with his son, arguing that the nudity involved—common among athletic Greeks—was indecent[5].

Julius Caesar became well-known for his impressive swimming ability, particularly when he recounted his escape from Alexandria during the Battle of the Pallium by swimming[6]. In contrast, Alexander the Great expressed his sadness and

[1] Louvre Br4454; Swimmer_Orontes_Louvre_Br4454.jpg (3500×1842)
[2]Golden 2004, 20.
[3] Laws, 689D & Diogenianus, Paroem.,6.56
[4] Plu. 20.7
[5] Cato the Elder 20.4–7
[6] Suetonius, Julius, 21; cf. Aug.64

regret about not having learned to swim[1]. Interestingly, Suetonius notes that Emperor Gaius Caligula, despite his numerous accomplishments, was also unable to swim[2].

Livy notes the use of divers in rescue operations throughout history. He recounts how the Macedonian king Perseus predicted his defeat by the Romans in 168 BC and ordered his treasure to be thrown into the sea at Pella Beach. However, divers were able to recover most of it. Roman law later granted salvage divers the right to keep a portion of the sunken objects they found. Additionally, a law was established outlining the obligations of merchants whose goods were retrieved by divers under the rules of disposal. Divers played a significant role during the Roman era. For instance, when Epirus attempted to thwart Pompey in 48 BC by sinking ships laden with rocks, they utilized swimmers and divers to retrieve the objects, allowing them to be pulled away[3]. Similarly, the ruler of the city of Tyre sent divers to cut the anchor ropes of the ships belonging to Alexander's army that were besieging the city[4]. Skilled Roman divers and swimmers were also crucial during the era of Septimius Severus. In 194 AD, Byzantine divers swam to the besieged ships and successfully pulled them out to avoid capture[5].

A first-century Latin poet describes the swimming technique as follows: "Just as a dolphin glide through the water with swift fins, rising above the surface and then sinking back into the depths, so does each person born under the sign of the dolphin navigate the waves. They alternately raise one arm and then the other, their hands forming an arc. At one moment, they can hear the sound of their hand striking the water, and at another, they will separate their arms underwater like an invisible oar. At times, they may be thrown into the water vertically, appearing to swim while actually walking. They can stand in the water, seeming to walk on the surface, and sometimes relax their motionless limbs by bringing them back to their sides. They do not push against the water but instead float above the waves[6].

4- Nudity in Cultural Contexts: Swimming as a Case Study

In ancient Greek civilization, swimming was more than just a recreational activity or a practical skill; it held symbolic meanings that went beyond the physical act. It represented transformation and a transition between two states of being. Immersing oneself in water signified a shift from one consciousness to another, moving from

[1] Suetonius, Julius, 21
[2] Suetonius, Calig.54
[3] Dio Cassius 42. 12.2
[4] Arrian 2. 21. 6
[5] Forest, 1968, 185; Dio Cassius lxxv. 12
[6] Manilius, On Astronomy 5.419-430

mental alertness to a state of emotional immersion that approached ecstasy or purification.

Literary texts often hint at this deeper significance. For example, in Euripides' play "The Cyclops", the satyr Selene is portrayed as rushing into the water after reaching the peak of intoxication. He declares, “I drink the cup of wine madly, and as soon as I feel better, I throw myself into salt water from atop a white rock.” This scene illustrates the crossing of boundaries between the body and water, acting as a rite of passage into a state of ecstasy or liberation. [1]

The transformative aspect of swimming is further emphasized in the poetry of Anacreon, who connects wine, desire, and diving into the gray waves from a high rock. For him, diving symbolizes a journey from earthly consciousness to a realm of pleasure and transcendence[2]. Consequently, in the Greek imagination, swimming and diving were not merely physical actions but rituals of transition and transformation between two levels of existence—between consciousness and emotion, dryness and fluidity, and life and other realms[3].

In Etruscan culture, swimming was not just a physical activity or a form of recreation; it had a deeper symbolic significance related to the idea of crossing—the transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Water served as an intermediary element between these two worlds and was frequently depicted in funerary art. The Etruscans skillfully crafted symbolic portrayals of death through their funerary murals. This raises the question: Did swimming maintain its symbolic meaning in Roman culture? In Roman culture, this symbolism endured, although it took on more diverse forms. Swimming and water crossings were also associated with religious and mythological concepts. According to Toynbee (1971), scenes of bathers often appeared in funerary mosaics, along with depictions of nymphs and Nereids accompanying souls. These images reflected the belief that crossing a sea or river, such as the River Styx in mythology, was part of the journey after death. This perspective aligns with religious thought that views water as a purifying element and a boundary between worlds, representing the final barrier between the living and the dead—one that is crossed with the help of the boatman Charon. In various funerary reliefs and paintings, the souls of the deceased are depicted being led across water,

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[1] Eur, Cycl.,164-6

[2] fr. 21 Edmonds, FAC (fr. 376 Campbell). ولمزيد من القفز من فوق الصخرة انظر:
DeVries, K. "Diving into the Mediterranean" *Expedition Magazine* 21.1 (1978), 5-6.

[3] شيماء عبد المنعم أحمد، "*السباحة وحماماتها عند الإغريق*"، مجلة أوراق كلاسيكية العدد١٨، ٢٠٢١، ٤٠٩-٤٦٨.

symbolized by birds, boats, or swimming scenes. This imagery indicates that the crossing is not only a physical act, but also a cosmic and spiritual journey[1].

In Pythagorean philosophy, the concept of transmigration, or metempsychosis, is a central principle. It suggests that the soul moves from one body to another. This process of transmigration is linked to spiritual purification, which is often compared to a cleansing water bath. This idea aligns with the symbolism of water found in classical texts, such as the Platonic myth of the River Lethe, where souls drink to forget their past before starting a new life[2].

The Etruscan approach to nudity in art significantly differs from that of Greek art. In ancient Greek culture, nudity was perceived differently than in neighboring Eastern civilizations. For the Greeks, it symbolized beauty, heroism, and physical purity. In contrast, Asian, Persian, and Berber societies regarded nudity as a sign of shame and a violation of moral values. Researcher Cough explores the reasons behind this stark contrast in attitudes toward nudity. She notes that the Greeks had a profound understanding of and interest in teaching swimming, while Persians and other Asian peoples neglected this despite having similar climatic and geographical conditions. Cough suggests that this aversion to nudity can be traced back to a cultural disdain for it; when individuals are taught from childhood that bodily exposure is shameful, they naturally avoid activities that involve nudity, such as swimming[3].

Herodotus, in his "Histories", supports this cultural perspective by recounting the story of Candaules and Giges, explaining that barbarians viewed exposure of the body as a sin deserving of condemnation, even among men[4]. Thucydides, in "History of the Peloponnesian War" (I.6), observes that playing sports naked was a relatively recent custom for the Greeks, while Asian peoples continued to wear leather aprons during boxing and wrestling[5]. Plato further emphasizes this view, showing that the Greeks initially adopted nudity hesitantly before it became a symbol of national pride and physical freedom[6]. Plutarch, in his "Life of Agesilaus", recounts the incident of Asian prisoners being stripped naked in Ephesus, describing their white and smooth skin as

[1] Toynbee, J. M. C., Death and burial in the Roman world. London: Thames and Hudson, 1971, 44–47.
[2] Plato, Rep. 10.
[3] Couch, H. N., Swimming among the Greeks and Barbarians. The Classical Journal, 29(8), 1934, 611–612.
[4] Hdt.1.10. 3
[5] Thuc. 1.6. 5
[6] *Rep*. 452 c

an indication of their affluent lifestyle and their distance from the physical ideals celebrated by Greek culture[1].

Thus, the differing attitudes toward the naked body between the Greeks and the Persians reflect a broader divergence in social and symbolic values. The Greeks viewed the naked body as an instrument of transcendence and heroism, while the Persians regarded it as a source of shame and sin[2]. It is also noteworthy that the Etruscans, who settled in western Italy before the rise of Rome, are likely of Asian origin, specifically from Asia Minor. This may help explain their relative reserve toward nudity compared to the Greeks, as well as their connection to certain elements of Eastern tradition in their understanding of the body and funerary practices.

Generally, the Etruscans avoided depicting the full nude body, instead opting to represent figures in simple clothing, such as the perizoma[3]. While nudity may occasionally appear in funerary art, it does not signify social acceptance of the naked body. Instead, it often carries specific symbolic meanings. Larissa Bonfante notes that nudity in Etruscan art does not convey heroic values or aesthetic ideals as it does in Greek art. Rather, it serves as a "symbolic costume" that indicates certain social classes, such as slaves or children, or is used in special contexts related to death and the passage to the afterlife[4]. In this regard, Digmund discusses the symbolism of nudity in funerary art, highlighting that nude figures are typically associated with religion or death rather than with everyday life or the public sphere. This reinforces the ritualistic and symbolic nature of this unique artistic expression[5].

The scene of naked swimming or diving depicted in Etruscan tombs is primarily understood as a ritualized religious expression related to the passage to the afterlife,

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[1] Plutarch *Ages*. 9

[2] Couch, H. N., 1934, 611–612.

[3] The perizoma was used as a genital covering, serving as an alternative to the full nudity that was prevalent in Greek art. Larissa Bonfante has noted that the Etruscans often depicted athletes or slaves wearing the perizoma, rather than showing them completely nude. This choice reflects their preference for modesty and symbolic representation, distinguishing their approach from the Greek heroic tradition. Additionally, Myles McDonnell conducted a study comparing Greek and Etruscan influences and highlighted a group of Attic pottery intended for the Etruscan market, known as the "Perizoma Group." This pottery features athletic figures wearing the garment instead of being fully nude, further confirming the existence of social or symbolic modesty within Etruscan culture; Bonfante 2003. Ch. 2: “Perizoma and Belts.”; McDonnell 1993, 395–407; Bonfante 1989, 543–570.

4 Bonfante 1989, 543–570.

5 De Grummond, N. T., *Etruscan myth, sacred history, and legend. Philadelphia*, PA: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2006.

rather than a portrayal of everyday life[1]. In this context, nudity cannot be viewed separately from funerary symbolism, especially since Etruscan culture did not accept complete nudity in public settings. In contrast, the Greeks and Romans practiced swimming in the nude as part of their daily lives, and this activity was not imbued with religious or ritual significance. This distinction highlights the different cultural meanings associated with nudity in these societies. Notably, the Greeks celebrated the naked body in the context of sports, frequently depicting athletes without clothing in their art as a representation of aesthetic ideals and physical heroism. This appreciation for nudity influenced the Romans, who embraced it despite some conservative backlash. Even though there were criticisms regarding nudity, it remained socially acceptable and was often linked to certain sports, especially swimming. In fact, a lack of interest in swimming was sometimes interpreted in ancient texts as an aversion to nudity itself. This illustrates the profound connection between nudity and swimming in Greek and Roman social consciousness, which stands in stark contrast to the Etruscan emphasis on modesty and discretion in body representation[2].

5- **Swimming as a Passage: The Symbolism of Water and Transformation in Etruscan Funerary Art**

In ancient Mediterranean cultures, water played a crucial role in the beliefs surrounding death and the journey to the afterlife. Crossing water was seen as a symbol of transformation, marking the transition from life to death. This concept is deeply rooted in classical mythology, as illustrated by the crossing of the River Styx in Greek mythology, which separates the realms of the living from the dead. Jean-Pierre Vernant explains that, in this context, water is not merely a natural element; it embodies a "cosmic boundary" between life and death, which is crossed in religious and funerary rituals[3].

In his classic work, "The Rites of Passage" (1960), Arnold van Gennep presents a model for analyzing rites of passage in human societies. He demonstrates that social or individual transformations occur through three main stages: separation, passage (or liminal state), and integration. The separation stage represents an individual's departure from their previous state or group. The passage stage signifies the symbolic or real transitional state between the two. Finally, integration marks the individual's or group's entry into a new social status[4]. This model can also be applied to death

1 For a collection of Etruscan sporting scenes, including swimming, please see: Bevagna 2014, ch.26: 395-411.
2 Couch 1934, 611.
3 Vernant J., Myth and thought among the Greeks. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, 287.
4 Arnold van Gennep, 1960, 146-165.

rituals, as death is viewed as a transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead. The deceased is separated from daily life and undergoes a liminal journey, often represented through symbols such as a vessel or a spiritual guide, before being integrated into the afterlife or ancestral realm. This framework allows us to interpret funeral rites not only from a ritualistic perspective but also from symbolic and social viewpoints, providing insight into how societies cope with death and other significant transitions[1]. Examining funerary crossing rituals in Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman civilizations through the lens of van Gennep's model helps us understand how these cultures depicted the deceased's transition from the world of the living to the afterlife. For instance, this transition is expressed through the funerary boat in Egypt, the river ferry with a spirit guide in Greece, the swimming and funerary boat imagery in Etruscan art, and again the use of a boat in Roman art. These examples highlight the symbolic and social dimensions of this transition and what they reveal about perceptions of death, life, and existence after death.

Recent critical approaches have re-examined the symbolism of water as a liminal and transformative element in literature and art, highlighting its role as both a threshold and a medium of renewal. In her study "Crossing the Threshold by/around Water: A Critical Reading of the Liminal Experiences of Adolescents and Young Adults in Feeding the Moonfish and Our Place", Heidi Mohamed Bayoumy (2025) demonstrates how lakes and rivers function as psychological thresholds, mediating between trauma and healing, isolation and integration. Through her analysis of Feeding the Moonfish and Our Place, Bayoumy interprets water as a dynamic site of emotional passage, where young protagonists experience figurative death and rebirth, echoing Arnold van Gennep's and Victor Turner's anthropological models of liminality[2]. Although her focus lies in contemporary theatre, the conceptual resonance with ancient Orphic traditions is striking. Like the initiates who, in Orphic gold tablets, approach the waters of Mnemosyne and Lethe to achieve spiritual renewal[3], Bayoumy's characters confront their submerged fears beside water and emerge transformed. This continuity in symbolic logic—from the Etruscan representations of swimming as an Orphic rite of passage to modern artistic expressions—reveals the

[1] Szakolczai, Árpád, and Bjørn Thomassen. From Anthropology to Social Theory: Rethinking the Social Sciences. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019 https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/from-anthropology-to-social-theory/arnold-van-gennep/38297F53AC14675553490929B503EB57

[2] Heidi Mohamed Bayoumy, "Crossing the Threshold by/around Water: A Critical Reading of the Liminal Experiences of Adolescents and Young Adults in Feeding the Moonfish and Our Place." Children's Literature in Education 56 (2025): 165–181.

[3] Graf and Johnston 2007, 98–101.

enduring universality of aquatic liminality as a metaphor for human transformation and the crossing between life and death.

The research conducted by Ágnes Alföldy-Găzdac and Cristian Găzdac is vital for comprehending the symbolic role of water in classical funerary concepts. The authors reexamine literary and archaeological sources associated with the myth of Charon, establishing that the act of crossing a river in Greek and Roman thought transcended mere travel; instead, it represented a metaphysical rite of passage that signified the transition from the domain of the living to that of the deceased. The authors contend that in these texts and myths, water functions as a demarcation between realms and serves as an instrument of purification and transformation. Furthermore, funeral rituals frequently integrated water references in artistic representations, underscoring that water—and swimming in particular—was not solely a recreational or athletic activity. Rather, it embodied symbolic dimensions that resonated profoundly with Roman philosophical frameworks regarding death and transformation[1]. Overall, rituals incorporating water crossings or their visual symbols, such as boats and swimming, exemplified the critical moment of liberation from the corporeal body and the soul's progression towards immortality.

In Greek funerary art, the crossing of water symbolizes the soul's journey to the underworld across the River Styx, a passage facilitated by Charon, who ferries souls in his boat for a fee of one obol (a small silver coin). This theme is prominently depicted in Athenian lekythos scenes, where the deceased or their silhouette is shown standing on the riverbank, facing Charon, marking a symbolic transition between the two worlds. One notable example is a white-backed funerary lekythos from around 420 BC, which provides a rare artistic representation of this "fare of passage." In this scene, a young man is illustrated sitting on a tomb, holding an obol in his right hand, offering it to Charon, who is piloting the boat on the right. To the left, a woman stands making an offering at the tomb[2]. (Fig.10)

In Tarquinia the passage scene can be shown in the Tomb of the Blue Demons (Fig. 14)[3] it can be interpreted through Orphic-Pythagorean lens. The imagery shows the deceased walking towards a ship, which serves as the means of passage to the afterlife. Accompanied by funeral music and a symbolic procession, this scene embodies the idea of the soul's journey of transmigration and purification after death. The ship represents not only a physical journey but also a spiritual crossing, reminiscent of the

[1] Alföldy-Găzdac, Á., & Găzdac, C. (2013). Who pays the ferryman? The testimony of ancient sources on the myth of Charon. *Klio*, 95(2), 2013, 285–308.

[2] Alföldy-Găzdac, Găzdac 2013, 290, fig. 1; Oakley 2004,124, fig. 87.

[3] 15 Tomb Of The Blue Demons Stock Photos, High-Res Pictures, and Images - Getty Images; Steingraber 1986, 178-182

Pythagorean belief in the soul's transition through different realms on the path to purity and immortality.

Fig. 14

on Roman funerary art, marble sarcophagi also illustrate souls being guided in boats, often linked to depictions of the mythical River Styx. An example is the Sarcophagus of Charon, housed in the Vatican Museums. Additionally, the Sarcophagus of Orestes, also in the Vatican Museums, shows Clytemnestra and Aegisthus standing before Charon, while a dead man is depicted as being carried across the river[1]. (Fig.11) Furthermore, a Roman lamp from Perugia illustrates the journey of the deceased to the underworld, where Hermes, the Psychopomp, leads him to Charon's boat, from which he receives the fare for crossing the River Styx or Acheron[2]. (Fig.12)

The symbolism of water and crossing is not limited to the western Greek or Roman world; it also appears in the art of the eastern provinces of the empire, such as Egypt.

[1] Alföldy-Găzdac, Găzdac 2013, 301, fig. 2; Sourvinou-Inwood 1986, 216, no. 51.
[2] Alföldy-Găzdac, Găzdac 2013, 306, fig. 3.

In Egyptian funerary expressions, the idea of water as a boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead persisted, although it took on different artistic and religious forms. The ancient Egyptians held a profound belief that the Nile represented the sacred crossing through which the soul of the deceased sailed toward the west—the home of eternity and the kingdom of Osiris[1]. This concept is reflected in the boats depicted on late funerary stelae from Kom Abu Billu and other locations. For example, in one depiction (Fig. 15), the deceased is shown as Uranus inside a boat[2], while another illustrates the deceased lying on his left arm on two pillows within a boat[3]. (Fig. 16) The depiction of banquets and komos in Etruscan funerary art suggested that elements of Dionysian culture were intertwined with the Etruscan practices related to the dead and their beliefs about the afterlife[4].

[1] Water is a vital element in Osirian thought, historically associated with transformation, renewal, and resurrection. According to ancient Egyptian beliefs, the deceased would journey in the "boat of eternity" westward, toward the setting sun, where they would be reborn, much like their resurrection in the realm of Osiris. In this context, the Nile River symbolized not only the source of life in the mortal world but also a passageway to the afterlife. The Pyramid Texts describe the king ascending in Ra's boat to sail across the sky, while the Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead illustrate the deceased traveling in a solar boat to the kingdom of the West, the home of Osiris. This journey across water represented a ritual transition from mortality to immortality. Boats were also associated with divinity in funerary art. The god Ra traveled in his boat during the day and night, while Osiris was accompanied by his funerary boat in the “Lake of Creation.” Thus, the symbolism of boats and water for the ancient Egyptians was not merely artistic; it represented a theological essence. It affirmed that salvation could only be achieved by crossing the water—the boundary that separates the worlds of life and death—while also offering the promise of eternal resurrection in the embrace of Osiris. Hooper 1961, 25-26.

[2] Hooper 1961, pl. xiv-d .

[3] Hooper, 1961, pl.xv.a.

[4] Steingräber 2006, 68.

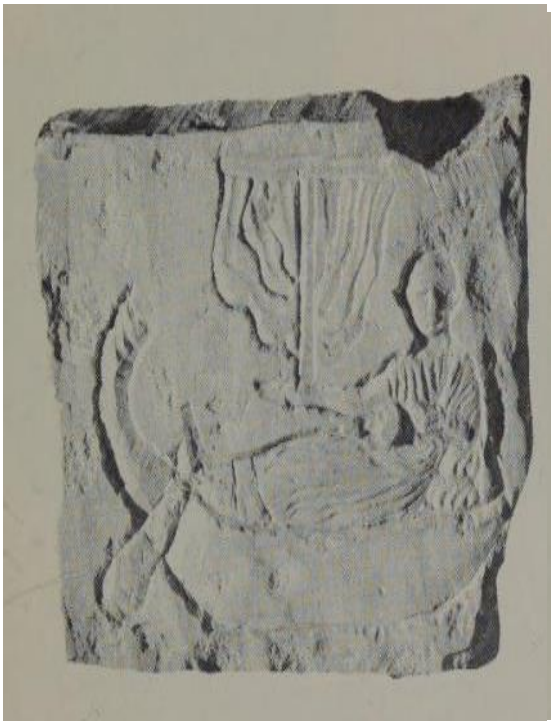


Fig. 16 **Fig.15**

The recurring depiction of this scene in funerary art across Egypt, Greece, and Rome highlights a common theme: water symbolizes transformation and passage, while the boat serves as a means of spiritual salvation. During the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, as cultures began to intermingle, Egyptian and Greek symbols merged, creating a shared vision of the journey after death. In this context, the boat evolved from a mere decorative element to a universal symbol of passage into eternity. In contrast, the Etruscan diving scene presents a unique artistic interpretation, where the deceased is transported and transformed by swimming instead of relying on Charon and his boat. This reflects a more intricate mythological language within Etruscan art.[1] These examples demonstrate how the act of swimming or crossing water in funerary art evolved from a symbol of life into a metaphor for death and the afterlife. This imagery evokes Gnostic, Orphic, and mythological themes, reflecting the Mediterranean civilizations' perception of death as a long journey that begins with the very first moment of immersion.

[1] Toynbee 1971, 44–47. Koch, Guntram. Roman Sarcophagi. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 112–115; Zanker, Paul, and Björn C. Ewald. Living with Myths: The Imagery of Roman Sarcophagi. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 88–92.

From Physical Experience to Spiritual Salvation

In Etruscan funerary art, scenes depicting swimming or jumping into water symbolize a ritual act representing the deceased's spiritual transition. Nancy de Grummond connects these depictions to Etruscan beliefs about life after death. She notes that diving scenes often appear on the walls of tombs in Tarquinia and are interpreted as representations of the deceased's passage to the afterlife through water[1]. Therefore, in Etruscan funerary art, water is not just a natural backdrop; it serves as a visual expression of ritual transition or a rite of passage, affirming the hope of survival and possibly immortality.

One of the most notable examples of Etruscan funerary art is the mural painting from the "Tomb of the Diver" in Paestum[2], which dates back to 480 BC. (Fig.3) This mural depicts a young man diving headfirst into still waters. In this context, the diving scene symbolizes the transition to the afterlife, distinguishing between worldly existence and the spiritual journey. This imagery resonates with the Orphic concept of the liberation of the soul. Here, water serves not just as a natural backdrop, but as a gateway for transformation, change, and purification, all themes well-known in Orphism. Similarly, this symbolic representation can be found in Etruscan funerary art, particularly in the murals of the Hunting and Fishing Cemetery (Tomba della Caccia e Pesca) in Tarquinia, dated to 530 BC. (Fig. 5) The scenes of swimming and diving into the water, set within seemingly mundane ceremonial contexts, actually depict rituals of transition. Jumping into open water may symbolize the initial step in the journey to the afterlife, where the sea acts as a barrier between life and death, reflecting the concepts of the beyond.

The back wall of the burial chamber in this tomb features two symbolically linked scenes. The first scene is a banquet in which a reclining couple is surrounded by figures engaged in activities such as hunting and playing music. This depiction may symbolize an aspect of the afterlife or represent life after death. The second scene shows a young man diving or jumping into the water while being watched by an onlooker. This act has been interpreted in the context of funerary beliefs as a symbolic representation of the soul's journey into the afterlife—a ritualized transition from life to eternity, rather than merely the physical act of diving[3].

The cemeteries of Paestum and Tarqunia showcase remarkable artistic boldness in their depictions of diving scenes. These acts are portrayed as being performed from high rocky cliffs, adding a ritualistic and symbolic dimension that transcends mere

[1] de Grummond 2006, 142–144

[2] The symbolic nature of this tomb highlights a personal scene associated with death, without depicting battle scenes or feasts.

[3] Tuck, S. L., The mysterious Etruscan. Chantilly, VA: The Great Courses, 2016, 38.

recreation or sport. This rock motif is evident not only in the cemetery of Paestum but also in the cemetery dedicated to land and sea hunting. One figure is shown climbing the rock in preparation for the jump, while another figure appears to have already completed the dive. The repetition of this motif in multiple locations suggests that the rock serves not just as a natural backdrop, but as a symbolic boundary separating the worlds of the living and the dead. It embodies a moment of ritualistic crossing over the water toward eternity.

In his analysis of the diver's scene at the Tomba del Tuffatore, William J. Slater presents two possible explanations. One possibility is that the deceased was either a professional or hobbyist swimmer or diver. Another option he suggests is that the individual may have drowned while swimming. Slater highlights the absence of archaeological or iconographic evidence supporting acrobatic practices (petauristarii) or representations of divers on pottery, whether attributed to Exekias or the Priam scene. Additionally, he notes the lack of parallel swimming or boating depictions. He emphasizes that our limited understanding of Italic archaic society undermines any argument for a purely functional interpretation of this scene[1]. Slater interprets the scene as a straightforward representation of an acrobat performing at a banquet. He references Cagiano de Azevedo's analysis of the tomb, which he describes as being "open" from the sides and the top. This perspective connects the diving scene to the banquet scene without implying any metaphysical link between the two[2].

Slater notes that this scene is different from the large pools described in classical sources such as Plato (Resp. 453d), Diodorus Siculus (Diod. Sic. 11.25), and Athenaeus (Ath. 12.541f). These classical descriptions accurately depict the Akragas pool that was dedicated to the ruler Gelon.

In his interpretation of the symbolic elements of the Tomb of the Diver, Mario Napoli suggested that the motif of the “egg” (*uovo*) should be understood within an Orphic-Pythagorean religious and philosophical framework. He believed the egg could symbolize creation, regeneration, and the connection between life and death—ideas that strongly align with the ritual act of diving depicted in the tomb. Although Napoli did not claim this reading to be definitive, he presented it as a potential key to understanding the metaphysical aspects of the imagery, which is consistent with Orphic beliefs about the soul’s journey and rebirth[3].

[1] Slater, W. J., High flying at Paestum. *AJA, 80*(4), 1976, 555-557.

[2] Cagiano de Azevedo, M, ‘Nugae’ sulla ‘Tomba del Tuffatore’ di Poseidonia, RA, 1972, 77–82

[3] Napoli, M., *La tomba del tuffatore*, Bari: De Donato, 1970, 109–111; Napoli, M., Le pitture greche della tomba del tuffatore. *Le Scienze,* 2(8),1969, 9–19.

D'Agostino and Cerchiai strongly endorse Mario Napoli's interpretation of the diving scene, recognizing it as rich in symbolic meaning that transcends a mere physical depiction. Cerchiai concedes that Napoli rightly highlights the scene's symbolic significance, yet he provocatively leaves the question open: should this symbolism be understood through the framework of Orphic or Pythagorean philosophy? This perspective suggests that the act of diving represents a profound journey into the afterlife, implying a deeper metaphysical connection rather than a strict alignment with any particular Orphic or Pythagorean sect. This interpretation invites us to explore the broader spiritual implications of the scene, offering a compelling lens through which to view the narrative of mortality and transcendence[1].

R. Ross Holloway offers a different perspective, arguing that Mario Napoli, the discoverer of the tomb, perceived the diver as a Pythagorean symbol representing the soul's journey through water. Holloway suggests that the diver's leap from the tower may symbolize crossing the Pillars of Hercules, which signifies a transition from the known world into a realm of blissful islands[2]. Additionally, Bianchi Bandinelli provides an iconographic interpretation, asserting that the platform itself represents one of the Pillars of Hercules, imbuing the scene with a metaphysical quality that reflects a belief in the afterlife[3]. Steingräber (2006) supports this interpretation, stating that the depiction symbolizes the passage into the realm of the dead, with water acting as a barrier between the earthly world and the afterlife[4].

Holloway challenges Slater's analysis by claiming that the depiction of the trees surrounding the diver does not exhibit a Baroque influence. Instead, he contends that it resembles similar representations in the scene featuring divers on the amphora attributed to Priam, which is preserved in Villa Giulia. He argues that the platform in the Paestum cemetery scene is a solid structure rather than a temporary acrobatic platform, which undermines Slater's argument. Furthermore, Holloway notes that the lack of evidence for acrobatic performances or divers at fifth-century BC Greek banquets supports his symbolic interpretation[5]. Holloway concludes that the diver perceives death as a swift passage to safety. He emphasizes that the scene is not necessarily based directly on Pythagorean or Orphic teachings; rather, it represents an adaptation of two images: diving as a transition to the afterlife, the tower as a symbol of protection, the olive tree as a symbol of peace, and the shore as the final refuge for

[1] D'Agostino, B., & Cerchiai, L., *Il mare, la morte, l'amore*. Rome: Donzelli Editore 1999, 51.
[2] Holloway 2006, 385.
[3] Bandinelli 1970,135-42.
[4] Steingräber 2006.
[5] Holloway 2006, 385.

the soul. In contrast, the cemetery banquet represents the state of happiness that awaits the deceased after this passage[1].

The diver is shown in an ideal position as he plunges into the water. The artist captured the scene as though a hidden camera had frozen the moment of his leap from a massive rock. Behind him, another diver and three fishermen in a boat observe the action. This image, which connects the diver and the boat, has parallels in Assyrian and Greek art, reinforcing the interpretation of the scene as a symbolic passage toward the afterlife[2].

Several researchers believe that the platform shown in the diver's scene at Paestum is not merely a plank used for athletic or recreational purposes. Instead, it represents a symbolic boundary between life and death. D'Agostino proposed that this platform serves as a gateway to Hades, arguing that the diver's position in the scene does not depict the moment of the jump itself but rather the aftermath—the moment of actual separation from the world of the living. He supported this view by comparing the scene to a similar example on an amphora from Monte Abetone in Rome, where a swimmer is depicted as a victim being swallowed by the Sirens, symbolizing the soul surrendering to its inevitable fate. The architectural structure shown in the background of the scene marks the transition toward eternal destiny rather than the act of swimming itself[3].

Holloway compellingly argues that the platform should not be seen as the "Gate of Hades" or one of the Pillars of Hercules, which typically symbolize the boundaries of the living world. Instead, he draws a fascinating comparison to the tower depicted on the Boston Aryballos[4] (Fig. 9), where Odysseus is portrayed triumphantly escaping the peril of the Sirens and emerging into safety. This perspective transforms the platform into a powerful symbol of hope and peace—representing a stage of renewal after overcoming danger[5]. In this light, the diver transcends the role of a mere swimmer; he embodies an Orphic spirit engaged in a profound, ritualized journey toward liberation. Water, in this narrative, serves as the crucial intermediary between two realms of existence, while the platform stands as the pivotal point marking the separation from the corporeal world. This interpretation not only enriches our understanding but also invites us to reflect on the transformative power of crossing thresholds in our own lives.

[1] R. Ross Holloway, "The Tomb of the Diver," American Journal of Archaeology 110, no. 3 (July 2006), 385.
[2] Pallottino 1952, 50; Swindler 1929, 111, 396; Sawula 1969, Fig, 130, p.147&143.
[3] D'Agostino 1982, 44-50.
[4] Holloway 2006, fig. 18.
[5] Holloway 2006, 384, fig.18.

The raised platform in Greek art, as illustrated by the vase created by the Priam Painter, depicts a scene in which several girls play near the water, with their garments hanging from tree branches. One girl is engaged in washing her hair under a tap, while another prepares to dive from the elevated platform, and a third girl appears below, contemplating the activities. The composition is framed by two olive trees[1] (Fig.13), which also appear in "The Tomb of the Diver." According to Holloway's interpretation, these trees serve a purpose beyond mere aesthetic appeal, symbolizing peace and security. Holloway posits that the raised platform represents hope and a safe passage through peril[2]. When examining this platform in conjunction with those depicted in other Greek pottery, it becomes apparent that the diver is surrounded by elements that convey connotations of hope and renewal following the crossing of the watery threshold[3]. Furthermore, a comparison of the tomb scene with a krater located in the British Museum, which portrays a group of divers accompanied by the sun god in his chariot, underscores Massa-Pirault's suggestion that the diver symbolizes not a

1 This amphora vase, in black-figure style, originates from Cerveteri, Etruria, Italy, and is preserved in the Museo Archeologico Etruscano di Villa Giulia in Rome, cataloged as no. 38. It dates to approximately 525-475 BC and is attributed to the artist Priam. The vase features a scene depicting a group of nude women (nymphs), some bathing in water while others use fountain spouts. Their clothes are shown hanging from trees, alongside a rocky scene and a collection of aryballos, which were used to hold perfume. While this does not appear to represent an official bathing area, it is notable for the raised platform designed for swimming and diving. On the opposite side of the vase, there is an image of the god Dionysus seated on a chair, holding a kantharos vessel in his hand. He is surrounded by vines and a group of satyrs who are picking grapes and placing them into baskets. The vase has been cataloged twice, first with the number 106463 and again with the number 2609: Angiolillo, 1997, 121, fig.66; Bardies-Fronty,. et al., 2009, 94, fig.12; Cornell 1997, 142, fig.15; Sweet 1987, 164, pl.49; http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetails.asp?id=26988E77-4580-42A1-817C-DCDB314F1B7A&noResults=&recordCount=&databaseID=&search=

2 Holloway emphasizes that the Pythagorean interpretation of the tomb is based on the ten reclining figures depicted in the banquet scene. In Pythagorean thought, the number ten (tetractys) symbolizes perfection and cosmic order. The number seven also appears in various decorative elements, such as the seven tree branches on either side of the diver, the seven steps of the tower, and the seven strings of the lyre in the banquet scene. However, Holloway clarifies that this number does not necessarily carry direct Pythagorean significance; instead, it illustrates the flexibility of numerical symbolism in popular culture. He also points out the connection between the diver and the kottabos players, suggesting that this relationship symbolizes a transition or leap into another world. This makes the image of the diver a part of a symbolic structure that intersects with Orphic and Pythagorean ideas about the soul's transmigration and liberation from the body. Holloway 2006, 378-381.

3 Steingräber 1986, 122–125.

human entity but rather a star plunging into the cosmic ocean, flanked by the previously mentioned trees. However, this composition is devoid of a clear symbol representing the underworld or a direct cosmic intermediary, such as the sun god, suggesting that the scene more likely represents a moment of cosmic transformation and the passage of light into the depths of the sea—a symbolic allusion to the cycle of annihilation and renewal[1].

Fig. 9

The rock is a recurring visual element in Greek bathing scenes, notably in the Vase of the Painter Priamus and the Diver's Tomb at Paestum. Its meaning differs greatly between these works. In the Vase of Priamus, the rock is part of a vibrant, lively scene that celebrates the human body in harmony with nature, conveying energy and joy. In contrast, in the Diver's Tomb and in the Hunting and Fishing's Tomb, the rock takes on a funerary significance, where diving symbolizes a passage into the afterlife. The isolated figure, head down and immersed in the unknown, evokes stillness and death, highlighting a stark contrast to the vitality seen in everyday Greek pottery. It is essential to recognize that swimming scenes in Greek pottery and non-funerary Roman art are fundamentally secular. Whether depicted on rock surfaces or symbolically referring to water, these representations do not use swimming as a metaphor for salvation or spiritual progress. Instead, they celebrate the human body as a symbol of power, harmony, and balance. For instance, painted vases from the fifth century BC, such as kylikes and skyphoi, illustrate everyday life and athletic practices related to physical education in gymnasiums, showcasing young men swimming or diving. In contrast to later Etruscan art, which portrayed swimming in the context of religious beliefs or ideas about the afterlife, the Greeks viewed

[1] Massa-Pirault P., *Le plongeon dans la mer: Symbolique et imaginaire de l'eau dans l'antiquité.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne, 2007, 78–82; Holloway 1994, 211–213.

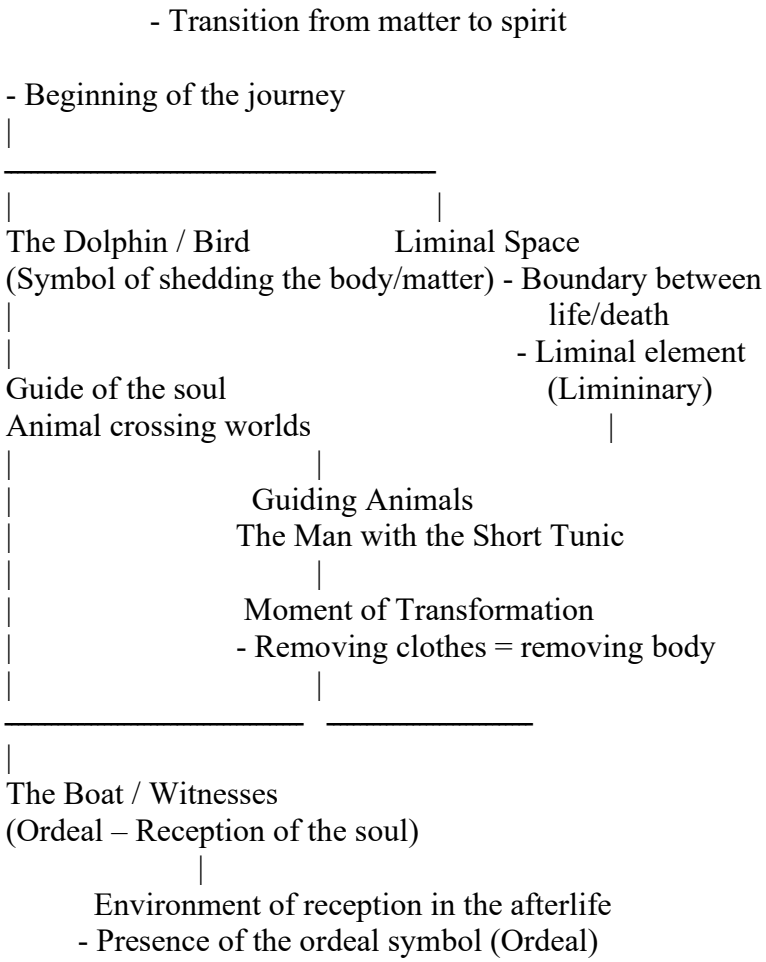
swimming as an essential part of training the ideal citizen and as a celebration of the body's harmony with nature[1].

In contrast, Etruscan visual culture, especially within funerary contexts, imbued swimming with a significant Orphic or Pythagorean and eschatological meaning. While Greek artists highlighted the vitality of the body in life, Etruscan painters reinterpreted the motif of swimming as an act of psychic transition—a symbolic crossing from the realm of the living to the domain of the dead. The repeated depictions of solitary swimmers in tomb frescoes, such as those at Tarquinia, transform the act of immersion in water into a ritual of passage. This evokes the Orphic belief in the soul's purification and its journey toward transcendence. Therefore, while the Greek swimmer celebrates arete (excellence) and the harmony of the body, the Etruscan swimmer embodies metamorphosis—a visual metaphor for death and spiritual renewal.

The Tomba della Caccia e Pesca (Hunting and Fishing Tomb) in Tarquinia is one of the most significant tombs that highlights the role of water as a central symbolic element in Etruscan funerary art. The diving scene, in particular, stands out for its connection to the concept of the transition from the world of the living to the realm of the dead. Here, immersion in water is not interpreted as a physical act or a mere life practice; instead, it symbolizes the soul's journey and the crossing of the boundary between the body and the absolute. This idea resonates with the Pythagorean principle of transmigration (metempsychosis), which suggests that the soul moves from one body to another through a continual process of purification. In this context, water symbolizes spiritual purification and resurrection, contrasting with the purifying role of fire in other doctrines.

Purification of the Soul

[1] Tuck 2016, 39.



The immersion scene in the tomb can thus be viewed as a visual representation of the purification process the soul undergoes on its path toward salvation. Water here is not just a physical element; it serves as a symbolic space for transition and transformation. This interpretation is further supported by other elements within the tomb, such as scenes of hunting, dancing, and musical performances—activities that carry ritual and spiritual significance within Orphic and Pythagorean thought. In these philosophies, music is associated with the harmony of the soul with the universe (the Harmony of the Spheres).

This interplay of symbolism and religion in the tomb's imagery makes the immersion scene a potential visual interpretation of the Pythagorean idea that life and death are merely successive stages in the cosmic cycle of the soul. Immersion in water represents the moment of profound transition when the soul departs from its physical vessel to enter a realm of spiritual purity. This concept aligns with what Plato later described in the myth of the River Lethe, where souls are purified by water before their rebirth[1].

In this light, the baptism scene in the Hunting and Fishing Tomb can be seen as a visual embodiment of the soul's journey toward salvation according to the Pythagorean perspective. It showcases an aesthetic and spiritual connection between the artistic representation and the philosophical principles of purification, transition, and union with the cosmic whole.

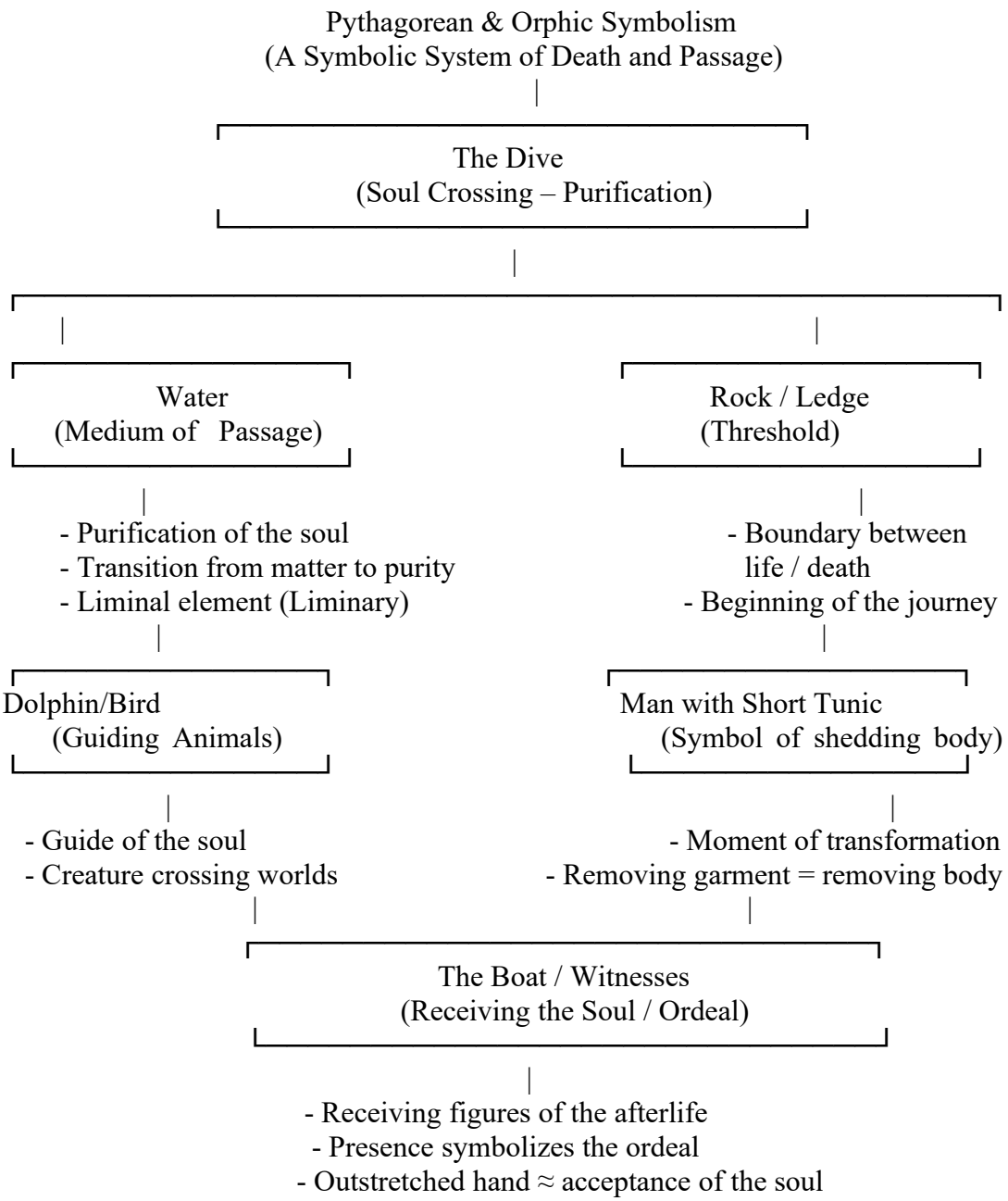
In Orphic mythology, the journey through water into the afterlife is not just a simple change of location for the soul; it symbolizes a ritual of purification and liberation from the cycle of reincarnation (metempsychosis). The Orphic Gold Tablets describe water as the boundary between forgetfulness and memory, as well as between material existence and divine purity. These texts suggest that when the soul reaches the realm of the dead, it must avoid the waters of forgetfulness (Lethe) and instead choose the waters of the Lake of Memory (Mnemosyne). This choice leads to immortality and esoteric knowledge—essentially restoring the soul's original divine identity[2]. In this context, the passage through water becomes an act of katharsis; water symbolizes the rebirth of the purified soul, which has gained complete awareness of its true nature and thus escapes the cycle of returning to a material body[3]. Therefore, Orpheus's mythical crossing of the River Styx is connected to a philosophical belief that views art and music as rituals that facilitate this watery passage toward purification and union with the divine, rather than as mere mythical events[4].

[1] Plato, Republic, Book X

[2] Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal 2008, 109–118 ؛Edmonds 2013, 145–151 ؛Graf and Johnston 2013, 78–83.

[3] West, M. L., *The Orphic poems*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1983, 17–19 ؛Zuntz G., *Persephone: Three essays on religion and thought in Magna Graecia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, 305–310.

[4] Kingsley, P., Meetings with Orpheus. *Phronesis*, 37(3), 1992, 296–299; Guthrie W. K. C., *Orpheus and Greek religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952, 188–191.



The concept of passage through water was by no means unfamiliar in these civilizations—Greek, Roman, or even Etruscan. Water often symbolized transition

and the journey of the soul, frequently represented by a boat, echoing the mythological figure of Charon as the ferryman of the dead. In this context, the act of diving or crossing water, whether literally or metaphorically, resonates with a longstanding cultural motif: the waterborne passage as a conduit between the material and the metaphysical realms. This underscores that the diving scenes in Paestum and Tarquinia are part of a broader symbolic vocabulary, where water functions as a medium of purification, transformation, and spiritual liberation, sometimes depicted through boats guiding souls across liminal thresholds.

The figure of the boatman who ferries the dead across the River Styx is a significant presence in Greek and Roman funerary mythology. However, he does not hold a central role in Orphism, which is based on the teachings of Orpheus and his vision of spiritual salvation. Orphism emphasizes the purity of the soul and highlights the principles of reincarnation and liberation from the body through initiatory rituals (*teletai*) and the pursuit of divine knowledge (gnosis)[1]. In Orphic thought, Charon is not seen as a divine being or a symbol of salvation; instead, he is regarded as a traditional mythical figure within the framework of the afterlife, representing a passage beyond death rather than a means of spiritual salvation[2].

The Orphic narrative uses the character of *Charon* for narrative purposes rather than for ritual ones. It suggests that Orpheus, through his enchanting music, was able to entice the souls of the wayfarers to cross into the underworld in his quest to restore Eurydice. This scene illustrates the Orphic view of art as a spiritual force that can transcend cosmic boundaries and connect with the other world[3]. However, this mythological portrayal does not imply that Charon was incorporated into Orphic beliefs or rituals. The Orphics did not regard him as a figure who received offerings or as a necessary symbol of passage. Instead, they believed that true passage was an internal process achieved through the purification and enlightenment of the soul[4]. Thus, Charon's presence in the Orphic narrative serves as a symbolic metaphor for narrative and semantic purposes, without signifying a doctrinal endorsement of his role within the Orphic religion.

[1] West 1983, 18-19.
[2] Graf & Johnston 2007, 78ff.
[3] Morales, 2004
[4] Burkert, 1987

Fig.11

Fig. 10

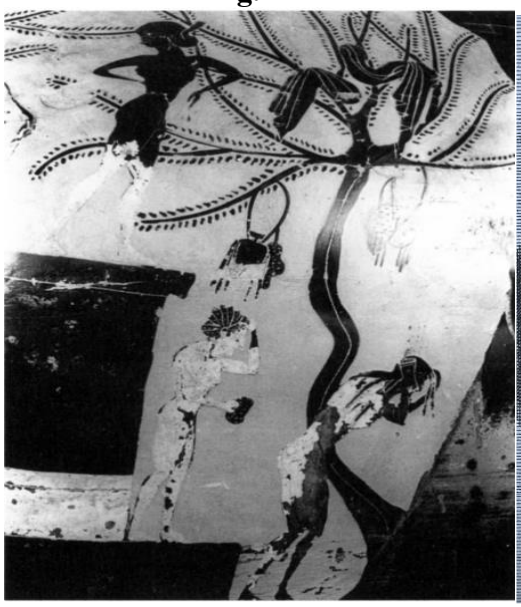


Fig.13

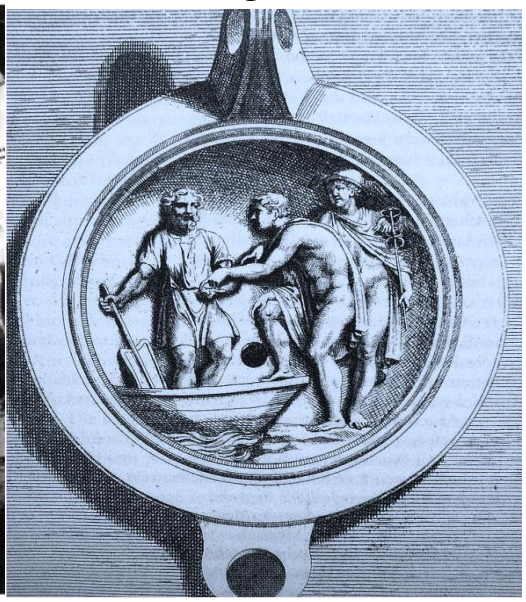


Fig.12

In his study, Bianchi-Bandinelli proposed that the banquet scenes in Etruscan funerary art represent and embody depictions of the heroic afterlife, particularly the islands of the Garden of Eternity[1], as described by Hesiod in his work "Works and Days"[2] Consequently, the banquet scene featuring swimming or diving (Fig. 4) is interpreted as occurring after the deceased has plunged into the Atlantic Ocean. Bianchi-Bandinelli argued that a building from which the diver jumps symbolizes the Pillar of Heracles, while the water into which the diver descends represents the boundary of the known world for the Greeks. This boundary marked the separation between the living and the grave for many centuries. Notably, the diver appears to dive into a small lake or spring rather than an ocean[3]. This interpretation aligns with Napoli's discussion of the diving scene in Etruscan tombs, suggesting it represents Pythagoreanism, where the soul of the deceased transitions into the afterlife and is purified through water[4]. From the very beginning, it was evident that Orphic beliefs were commonly found in Etruscan sarcophagi and tombs.

In the Orphic religion, the afterlife is viewed as a reunion of the soul with the gods, often represented as a banquet[5], as described by Plato[6]. Followers of Orpheus believed that the mortal body was merely a tomb for the immortal soul. Due to past evils or misdeeds, humans were separated from the gods. However, through secret rituals that purified the soul, individuals could reunite with the divine[7]. Plato referred to the Orphic concept of the afterlife as a banquet granted as a reward for the virtuous, while

1 Bianchi-Bandinelli, R., Review of La Tomba del Tuffatore by Mario Napoli. *DialArch*, 4, 1970, 142.

2 Hesiod, works and Days 156-179.

3 Kathryn Masterson, Lisa Rabinowitz, and Robert Robson, Sex in Antiquity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 143-145.

4 Purification rituals in various secret religions varied significantly from one cult to another. In the Aleutian religion, purification involved a collective bath in the sea along with the sacrifice of a piglet. In the rituals of Isis, priests performed individual baths in a bathhouse. The Corybantic rituals included priests washing the newly initiated members of their religion. These rituals, while initially focused on bodily purification, carried a deeper significance. They aimed to cleanse the soul of the disturbances and restrictions of everyday life, connecting it to the afterlife and the concerns of the other world. Additionally, these rituals served to purify the soul from the guilt accumulated due to unjust actions. Napoli 1970, 165; Graf and Johnston 2007, 144.

5 Masterson, and Rabinowitz, and Robson, 2015, 146.

6 *Gorgias* 493 a.

7 Sassi 1996, 515; Masterson, Rabinowitz, and Robson 2015, 146.

wrongdoers faced punishment in Hades[1]. He also noted that Orpheus[2] served as the messenger of the god Dionysus[3], linking Orphism to this deity. It is suggested that Orphism may have been similar to the mysteries of the Dionysian and Bacchic cults of southern Italy. Therefore, when a banquet is depicted in funerary art—, such as on tombstones or gravestones —it indicates that the deceased believed in Orphism and adhered to the teachings of the Muses. Plato elaborates on these ideas in his dialogue, The Republic[4]:

"*.....Musaeus and his son have a more excellent song than these of the blessings that the gods bestow on the righteous. For they conduct them to the house of Hades in their tale and arrange a symposium of the saints, where, reclined on couches crowned with wreaths....*"

Hesiod described banquet scenes as representations of the heroic afterlife in the Garden of Bliss[5], located beyond the western borders of the Mediterranean[6]. It is important to note that Orphism is based on the mysteries associated with the worship of Dionysus. According to the myth, the Titans devoured the flesh of Dionysus, the son of Zeus, who contained a divine element. However, Zeus was able to strike them down with a bolt of lightning, turning them to ash. From these ashes, Zeus recreated

[1] Masterson et el., 2015, 146.

[2] Orpheus was a renowned Thracian musician and singer, the son of the goddess Calliope and Apollo. His enchanting melodies could charm animals, monsters, and birds alike. He married the nymph Eurydice, and when she passed away, he mourned her deeply. Orpheus journeyed into the underworld (Hades) in search of her, determined to bring her back to the land of the living. He might have succeeded with his music, but he looked back, which cost him her return. Orpheus is also known as the founder of the Orphic sect. Ferruzza 2016, 17.

[3] Dionysus, the Greek god, was both worshipped in Greece and abroad. He was respected and loved, but also sometimes feared and awed by people in these regions. An eccentric deity, he embodied many contradictions that appealed to those seeking fulfillment of their desires, regardless of gender. Dionysus was the god of wine and revelry, secrets and the underworld, heroism and adventure, as well as fertility and agriculture. He represented emotional relief, drama, and generosity, and inspired poetry and poets. This multifaceted nature likely contributed to the Ptolemies weaving stories and myths about their connection to him, claiming descent from Deianira, the daughter of Dionysus, who was the son of Zeus, through their grandmother. Festugiere 1965, 65;

محمد، السيد رشدي، مراكز عبادة ديونيسوس في مصر في العصرين البطلمي والروماني، أعمال المؤتمر الثاني لاتحاد الأثريين العرب، القاهرة، ١٩٩٩، صـ١..

[4] Plat. *Rep*. 2.363c.

[5] Hes. *works and Days* 156-179.

[6] Masterson et el. 2015, p.143-145.

Dionysus in human form. Thus, humanity is composed of both a divine element, represented by the soul of Dionysus Zagreus, and an evil element, represented by the ashes of the Titans, which make up the body. As a result, the body (σώμα) was seen as the source of evil and the graveyard of the soul (σήμα)[1]. The teachings of Orphism stood in stark contrast to traditional Greek beliefs, which held that humans would spend their lives separated from the immortal gods. The Greeks did not believe in resurrection or immortality[2]; instead, they envisioned a form of paradise in the Eleusinian Mysteries, accessible only to immortal heroes, as mentioned by Homer in the Odyssey[3] and Hesiod in his works[4].

Orphic followers engaged in specific rituals and religious practices before death to purify the soul and unite it with the divine. One notable practice was abstaining from eating meat and participating in blood rituals[5]. This led them to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle, as they believed that consuming meat was akin to the actions of the Titans. Furthermore, they thought that a slaughtered animal might be the reincarnation of a friend or relative[6]. Water purification was another critical aspect of Orphic rituals, used in prayer and other ceremonies. Among the less confirmed practices was the suppression of sexual desires[7]. The Orphics demonstrated a particular disdain for

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[1] محمد جديدي، الفلسفة الاغريقية، منشورات الاختلاف، الجزائر، ٢٠٠٩، صـ ٧٢؛ أحمد فؤاد الأهواني، فجر الفلسفة اليونانية قبل سقراط، القاهرة، ١٩٥٤، صـ٢٩.

Freeman 1959, 12.

[2] Masterson et el. 2015, 146.

[3] *Odyssey* .11.57.

[4] Hesiod, *works and Days* 157-169.

[5] Aldernik L. J., *Creation and salvation in ancient Orphism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 70.

[6] Guthrie 1993, 196.

[7] Pontransdolf compellingly argues that banquets in Etruscan culture were not mere social gatherings; they were deeply intertwined with themes of the afterlife, immortality, and life beyond death. These events also explored sexual dynamics, particularly as they related to male pleasure, with the distinct notion that orgasm was solely a masculine experience. This backdrop facilitated the exploration of homosexuality, vividly illustrated in "The Diving Tomb." Pausanias (9.30.3) reveals that in the formative days of the Orphic cult, Orpheus mesmerized the Thracians with his enchanting music, inciting not only sexual arousal among men but also leading to homosexual encounters. Banquet scenes emerged as powerful symbols of the Orphic tradition, depicting the host as a devoted follower of the openly homosexual Orpheus. By the Classical period (around 480 BC), artistic representations began to surface, showcasing Orpheus on pottery, exclusively surrounded by men. Further evidence from literary sources (such as cannon FGrH 26 F 1.24; Pausanias 9.30.3) underscores the

women, a sentiment rooted in the myth of the Tarachians tearing Orpheus's body apart[1]. An essential ritual involved drinking from the Spring of Remembrance, also referred to as the Sacred Water of Salvation. Before experiencing transmigration, the Orphics would drink the Water of Leith, or the Water of Forgetfulness, to help them erase painful memories and experiences. This act aimed to achieve complete purification before their union with the gods[2]. The vessel, whether it was the omphalos, phial, or kantharos, held by those reclining at banquets served as a reminder for the living to offer libations. It may have also symbolized the ritual of drinking water from the Spring of Leith or the Spring of Forgetfulness during the afterlife.

Orphic devotees fervently sought certainty about the fate of their souls in the afterlife, which spurred the creation of a compelling framework for understanding this existential concern. They invented the profound concepts of judgment and transmigration of souls, envisioning a transformative journey that would cleanse sinners of their wrongs until they were wholly liberated from the burdens of the Titanic element[3]. Only then could these souls ascend to heaven and reunite with their divine essence. The bathing scene in Etruscan art emerges as a striking Orphic symbol, further reinforced by the presence of various other Orphic motifs within the tomb[4].

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exclusion of women from Orphic rites. This literature elucidates how Orpheus brought the concept of "masculine love" (erotas arrenas) to Thrace, ultimately leading to his tragic downfall at the hands of jealous Thracian women, who could not bear the estrangement of their husbands drawn to the mesmerizing figure of Orpheus. Such narratives not only highlight the intricate social dynamics of the time but also challenge our understanding of gender and sexuality in ancient cultures. See: Pontransdolfo 1996, 458; Masterson et el. 2015, 148.

[1] محمد جديدي، ٢٠٠٩، صـ٧٣.

[2] Smart 2015, 146.

[3] Mickalson 2005, 56.

[4] The portrayal of men engaged in intimate relationships underscores the perception of Orpheus as a homosexual figure, an aspect that may have fueled the motivations of women who, in certain narratives, tragically conspired against him during the death of Heracles; Phanocles, Erotes ē Kaloi, fragment 1 (in Stobaeus, Florilegium 20.2.47), lines concerning Orpheus' love for Calais, translation and commentary in J. U. Powell, Collectanea Alexandrina (Oxford, 1925); Ovid, Metamorphoses 10-152-54; Janan, 1988, 110-37; Ingleheart 2015, 58:59-73; Ziogas 2021, 365-390.
Additionally, the striking image of a couple holding an egg symbolizes rebirth and the potential for new beginnings, resonating with Orphic beliefs about the soul's journey. Together, these symbols create a powerful tapestry that reveals the depth of Orphic thought and highlights the sacred nature of the souls' pursuit of purification and divine reunion. The cosmic egg is one of the most significant symbols associated with the Orphic tradition. It

These elements deepen our appreciation of the scene and illuminate the rich theological context behind its creation.

On the other hand, the diving scene in the Tomb of the Diver at Paestum can be interpreted as a metaphor for the soul's transition through water, aligned with Pythagorean ideals that associate the number seven with completeness. The repetition of seven in the artwork enhances the theme of cosmic transition, symbolizing the soul's liberation from the body[1].

In contrast, the diving scene in the Tomb of Hunting and Fishing in Tarquinia unfolds in a vibrant natural setting, depicting aristocratic daily life. Though it appears more straightforward, elements like the dolphin and the observers' posture invite an Orphic-Pythagorean interpretation, representing the soul's passage and purification.

Comparing these scenes reveals differing symbolic expressions: the Paestum scene is implicit and abstract, grounded in its social context, while the Tarquinia scene is more explicit and detailed. Nonetheless, both highlight the dive as a connection between the material and metaphysical worlds, emphasizing water's role in purification and transformation, reflecting the influence of Pythagorean thought across cultures.

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appears in Orphic cosmogonic texts as the initial origin from which the god Phanes (or Protogonos) emerges—a luminous being who brings life to the world. In this context, the egg symbolizes a unique Orphic vision of creation and resurrection, as it is depicted as the container of the universe before it unfolds and separates into its first elements. This symbol enhances the cosmic and spiritual character of Orphic mythology, connecting it to themes of renewal and the cosmic cycle. Later artistic representations, especially those featuring the egg with a serpent coiled around it, further solidified the egg's status as a distinct Orphic symbol. As a result, modern scholarship often views it as a hallmark of Orphic religion rather than being associated with Pythagorean or other Greek traditions.see:
West 1983, 73–80; Guthrie1993, 85–90; Burkert 1985, 296–98; Bernabé et al., eds., 2013, 140–50.

[1] There are seven branches on each of the two trees, seven strings on the musical lyre, and fourteen figures in the symposium scenes (which is twice seven). Additionally, seven cubes form the base of the column or platform from which the diver launches. This repetition is not random; rather, it reflects the Pythagorean view of the number seven as a telesphoric number that symbolizes completion and fulfillment. According to this belief, the cycles of human life are measured in seven stages, culminating in the achievement of one's ultimate destiny. Marianna Castiglione, "La Tomba del Tuffatore: Nostalgia etrusca in Magna Graecia. Ancora sulla figura del defunto," in La pittura etrusca / L'Italia prima di Roma, ed. G.M. Della Fina, IV e V corso di perfezionamento (anni accademici 2005–2006, 2006–2007), Italia Antiqua 3 (Roma: 2008), 156.

Conclusion

The unique appearance of swimming scenes, particularly the depictions of naked swimmers in Etruscan art, can be understood within the context of the eschatological trends that Etruria experienced in the fourth century BC. This period saw a general shift in iconography, influenced by the influx of new ideas about the afterlife, largely due to the spread of esoteric sects such as the Pythagoreans and the Orphics. The swimming scenes can be interpreted as a visual representation of this intellectual transformation. The physical movements through water and the act of swimming symbolize the soul's journey and its transition between worlds, aligning with Orphic and esoteric beliefs. Consequently, these scenes reflect what scholars describe as a "radical shift in mental structures," evident in funerary art through the use of symbols that represent the soul's passage and the thresholds of the afterlife.

The examination of swimming scenes in Etruscan funerary art reveals a significant transformation in the visual and philosophical conception of the passage to the afterlife. In early Etruscan and Roman art, the funerary boat symbolized the transition between the worlds of the living and the dead—a motif deeply rooted in Egyptian and Greek beliefs, particularly those surrounding the river Acheron and the ferryman Charon. However, as religious and philosophical ideas evolved in ancient Italy, a striking iconographic shift occurred: the deceased began to be depicted not as a passenger on a boat, but as a swimmer crossing the waters under their own effort.

This change marks an important spiritual and intellectual transition—from reliance on an external means of passage (the boat and Charon) to a self-propelled crossing through one’s own body. As a result, the body ceased to be a purely physical vessel and became a symbol of the soul’s purification and liberation through water. Consequently, the funerary image evolved from a material rite of passage into a spiritual metaphor of inner transformation, reflecting a deeper understanding of the soul’s journey after death.

This evolution was significantly influenced by Pythagorean and Orphic doctrines, which associated water with purification and renewal as prerequisites for spiritual ascent. In these traditions, salvation is not achieved passively, but through the active effort of the soul—a process of bodily and spiritual cleansing. Within this framework, swimming in funerary imagery came to represent the soul’s personal effort to achieve transcendence, in contrast to the earlier passive depiction of being ferried across the river of death. Water, therefore, became both a boundary and a means of salvation, embodying the dual aspects of liminality and purification, of physical death and spiritual rebirth.

From an artistic perspective, this transformation introduced new dynamism and emotional intensity into Etruscan funerary art. The swimming figure conveys movement, vitality, and liberation—contrasting with the static serenity of the boat scene—and visually expresses the soul's active passage toward freedom rather than submission to an imposed fate.

Ultimately, the symbolism of swimming in Etruscan funerary art represents the culmination of this intellectual and spiritual evolution. It redefined the human relationship with death in light of Orphic and Pythagorean thought: water ceased to be merely a barrier separating life from death and instead became a medium of redemption, while swimming evolved from a physical act into a spiritual ritual of purification and transcendence. This concept continued in Roman art, although expressed through new imagery—such as the voyage with Charon—affirming the enduring significance of water as both a threshold and a passage in the funerary imagination of the ancient Mediterranean world.

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