

# Painting, Pots, and Burials: An Analysis of Pre-Roman Women in Southern Italy

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## Abstract

Research on gender in Ancient Rome has been well underway in the past couple of decades and has revealed the rigidity of gender roles and the limitations placed on women through the Republic into the Empire. On the other hand, research on women in pre-Roman societies has been limited. Considering the early cultural interactions between Roman and non-Roman populations in the Italian peninsula, it is not a given that gender roles were the same across the region. Through an analysis of different kinds of material culture — particularly ceramics and grave goods — it is apparent that the social mobility of women in the regions of Campania and Apulia was more flexible than in Ancient Rome. Women were able to build their own status and wealth through ritual banquets and familial associations, pointing to a slightly more egalitarian society than previously believed. This research paper aims to highlight pre-Roman women of Southern Italy in order to open the doors for more discussion and research on these oft-overlooked figures of ancient society.

## Introduction

Somewhere tucked in the hills of Pietrabbondante, two woman tile-makers pressed their feet into a tile, making four small marks. Satisfied with their footprints imprinted onto the tile, they left two inscriptions, one in Oscan and the other in Latin.

Oscan: Dettfri (slave?) of Hin. Sattiis marked (this) with a footprint.

Latin: (slaves) of Heirens marked (this) when we were laying out the tile

Dated to the late second century BCE, the marks these women left have lasted thousands of years, providing archaeologists a rare intersectional glimpse at ancient life in Samnium. The text reveals that these women

were not only slaves but also literate in either Oscan, Latin, or potentially both languages (McDonald 2022, 135). Though the Latin text may indicate some intermingling with Roman culture, the Oscan indicates the plural identity between these two women, and—consequently—raises questions about the congruences within the gender dynamics of both Rome and Samnium. While many scholars have assumed that these groups shared gender systems with the Romans or Greeks, recent archaeological evidence indicates that attitudes surrounding gender were not as straightforward as literary sources would assume (Scopacasa 2014, 241-242). Scholarship in the past two decades sheds light on the varying gender dynamics of these indigenous populations. In this paper, I will look into scholarship focused on several

ethnic groups to uncover the roles of women in pre-Roman southern Italy, ranging from the seventh to fourth centuries BCE. Beginning with the red-figure vase painting of Apulia, I will look into its connection with Greece and how the differences in painted women between the Apulian and Greek vases reveal both overlaps and divergences between the two cultures. After finishing the discussion on vases, I will move on to tombs. In Apulia and Samnium, red-figure vases are often linked with funerary contexts, while other ethnic groups—the Dauci—exhibited gendered burials through other means, such as stelae or personal ornaments. The section will focus on gendered burials within these two groups. Through an analysis of these aspects of material culture, I will argue that pre-roman societies of the Italian peninsula—particularly Samnium and Apulia—had more egalitarian gender societies than ancient Rome prior to their eventual conquest.

Cultural integration throughout the Italian peninsula was a slow process. During the Roman conquest, language was a distinct and complex aspect of identity (Lomas 2013, 73). In the third century BCE, the Italian peninsula began to be considered as somewhat Roman territory, as roads connected pre-Roman territories with the growing Republic (Dench 2005, 164-165). By the first century BCE, there is evidence for a “loss of a perceived sense of local distinctiveness,” essentially blurring cultural boundaries between Romans and other Italic populations (Dench 2005, 175). Samnites fiercely fought against Roman conquest, which could indicate some stark cultural differences between the two (Scopacasa 2014, 241). While Roman conquest, particularly that of language, did not fully develop until the late second to first centuries, Greek colonists were making their way through

southern Italy beginning in the eighth century BCE (Lomas 2013, 72; see also Shepherd 2012, 218). Before becoming engulfed in the Roman identity, several indigenous populations lived throughout Italy. Scholars have long debated over the ethnic labeling of these populations, especially as ethnic boundaries changed and developed over time (Yntema 2009, 146). Individual populations may label themselves differently from those given to them by Greek and Roman writers, which complicates ethnic definitions (Yntema 2009, 163). These labels, which were created mostly by the Greco-Roman authors, are not indicative of the way that these populations would have represented themselves (Lomas 2013, 75). For the purpose of this paper, I will be focusing on the modern-day regions of Campania and Puglia, which include ethnic groups which most scholars refer to as the Samnites, Dauci, Peucetii, and Messapi.

The native populations of the southern regions of Italy have been long ignored by English and American scholars, despite the rich cultural geography of the area (Carpenter, Lynch, and Robinson 2014, 2). Though gender archaeology in pre-Roman Italy is constantly developing and updating, the current record provides an abundance of evidence for different cultural attitudes toward gender. The diversity of cultural identities within southern Italy points to a variety of gender dynamics of which scholars have only begun to scratch the surface.

### Red-Figure Vase Painting

The native populations of the Apulia left no writings of their own, leaving scholars to look at artifacts—such as red-figure pottery—for evidence. Though surviving texts from Greek sources include mentions of the Apulian people, they were often hostile in

nature and therefore not reliable as the sole source (Carpenter 2009, 28). Red-figure pottery, therefore, serves as the “text” with which archaeologists can uncover the identities of these often overlooked groups (Carpenter, Lynch, and Robinson 2014, 1). Attic red-figure pottery first appeared in Apulia in the sixth century BCE, mostly through imports to Greek colonies in the region (Carpenter, Lynch, and Robinson 2014, 1). By the early fourth century BCE, imported pottery was almost entirely replaced by pottery produced in local workshops in the Lucanian and Apulian regions (Carpenter, Lynch, and Robinson 2014, 1). As regional production became more developed, pottery styles and artworks began to diverge from the Attic models to reflect the identities of the region rather than the identities of Greece (Carpenter, Lynch, and Robinson 2014, 1-2). Though Greek colonists were present in Apulia—specifically in the colony of Tarentum—and brought the technique of red-figure painting to the area, local craftsmen adopted artwork for the native population, resulting in a style that reflects regional identities (Carpenter 2009, 30-32; see also Herring 2009, 27). Key differences between Greek and Apulian pottery can be found in imagery: Apulian vases included Italic elements such as clothing, utensils, and armor, as well as depictions of nude male figures alongside women (Carpenter, Lynch, and Robinson 2014, 7-8).

According to Keely Elizabeth Hueur, one of the most common motifs in South Italian vase paintings is the isolated head, which most often appears in the pottery of Apulia and Campania (Heuer 2015, 63-65). Though isolated heads appear on vases outside of Southern Italy, their depictions are not nearly as frequent, which could indicate a cultural significance associated with the motif (Heuer 2015, 64). The majority of these

isolated heads are female, often depicted with “the hair pulled up and contained in a headdress, and nearly always wearing jewelry—necklaces, earrings, and diadems of various forms” (Heuer 2015, 66). Rarely are any of these floating heads identifiable, whereas full figures are almost always accompanied by an inscription (Heuer 2015, 68). With the lack of an inscription, scholars are left to deduce their meaning based on imagery alone. Some scholars attribute the floating heads to divine figures while others argue that they are purely decorative (Heuer 2015, 68). Heuer proposes that the vague identity of the floating heads was due to the broad cultural range of customers, allowing viewers to interpret the heads according to their own ethnic or religious affiliations (Heuer 2015, 70). If this is the case, then the prevalence of female heads would indicate some ritual significance of women, as many of the floating heads are found on ritually significant objects or in ritual contexts such as burials.

Though the prominence of isolated heads in South Italian vase painting prompts further investigation, other motifs and depictions similarly illuminate the cultures of pre-Roman southern Italy. Edward Herring focuses on the depictions of native women in Apulian vase paintings. In both Campanian and Apulian red-figure pottery, native men are clearly depicted in traditional costume—patterned tunics—while women are harder to distinguish from standard Greek depictions (Herring 2009, 27; see also Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 96). The traditional women’s costume of both Campania and Puglia included elements such as a headdress, a dress with patterned borders, and dark colors (Herring 2009, 28-29; see also Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 102). These clothes would have likely been reserved for religious or ceremonial events, as the

depictions of women in traditional costume most often appear in ritual scenes (Herring 2009, 28-29; see also Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 102). While evidence shows that both Campanian and Puglian women usually wore the Greek-style dress, some small signifiers of ethnicity would still be present, such as belts, pendant ornaments, and decorated borders of dresses (Herring 2009, 29; see also Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 95). Based on the less visible representation of a tribal costume, Herring concludes that for Apulian women, ethnic affiliation might not have been a “significant (or visually stressed) aspect of female identity,” while it retained significance for men (Herring 2009, 29). Herring also proposes that the disconnect between representations of men and women in tribal costume could be the result of a society that secluded women—that is, kept them away from vase-painters—or a society that found it inappropriate for women to be depicted in art (Herring 2009, 31).

Red-figure vase painting tends to focus on ritual scenes, illuminating the roles of women in the religious sphere. Campanian women are often depicted in scenes alongside men, typically warriors returning or departing for battle (Herring 2009, 28; see also Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 113). The men, evidently of high status as indicated by the elaborate costume, weapons, and other spoils of war, were likely husbands of the women (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 102). The woman’s affiliation with a high-status man, paired with the accompanying servants and elaborate costume, further solidifies her high status (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 102). These paired scenes often hold religious connotations. Several rituals were associated with a woman sending her husband off into battle and welcoming him upon his return. While the religious roles of women were often linked in some way or another to their

male relationships, evidence exists of exclusively female roles—particularly in the religious realm (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 106). Fertility seems to be a core element of Samnite rituals, and fertility symbols appear frequently alongside depictions of cults associated with death and marriage (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 106). Eros was a particularly important deity for not only southern Italian women but Greek women as well (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 107-108). Based on vase paintings, it is likely that an Eros cult—mostly occupied by women—was present in southern Italy, and often used as the subject of cult scenes in vase paintings (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 108). Two main depictions of Eros differentiate the Greek worship from the Samnite one. The Samnite Eros appears more effeminate, usually depicted with jewelry associated with wealthy women (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 108). In these depictions, women are shown presenting ritual offerings to the god (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 108). While the cult is not exclusively female, the feminine markers—such as the jewelry—strengthen the association with femininity over masculinity. It is possible that these scenes are not mythological, and instead depict ritual scenes in which a priest is dressed as Eros (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 108). These scenes where a priest is dressed as the god are unique to South Italian vase painting, which could point to a uniquely Italic aspect of the cult which differentiates it from the Greek cult of Eros (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 108). The prevalence of this effeminate Eros in southern Italian red-figure pottery once again speaks to the significance of the cult and the connections between pre-Roman women and religion (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 110).

While the depictions of women in red-figure pottery provide unparalleled

information on pre-Roman religious ceremonies, they also somewhat restrict our knowledge of Southern Italian women to their ritual roles (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 96). Regardless, there exist some iconographic examples of quotidian scenes (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 105). Vase paintings with depictions of women weaving are rare, most likely because weaving was not considered an elite activity, and non-elite women are depicted much less frequently (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 105; see also Herring 2019, 93). Consequently, vase painting does not provide the fullest picture of daily activities for Samnite or Apulian women. Herring brings up other issues with using red-figure pottery as a sole source, stating that, “even though it is a broadly realistic medium, it is highly selective and idealising in terms of who was depicted, how they were depicted, and in what contexts” (Herring 2009, 33).

### Grave Goods from Samnium to Daunia

While red-figure pottery alone is not enough to fully capture the social dynamics of pre-Roman southern Italy, we might be able to understand more by looking at other artifacts, particularly those found in burials. Tradition in pre-Roman Italy called for a rich furnishing of tombs, which included not only red-figure pottery but also bronze vessels and armor and gold and amber jewelry, among other objects, all of which “offers a direct reflection of the community’s ideological heritage, its social structure, its productivity, and its commercial relationships” (Carpenter, Lynch, and Robinson 2014, 2, 133; see also Herring 2009, 27).

Archaeological evidence from pre-Roman Italy comes largely from funerary contexts (Carpenter, Lynch, and Robinson 2014, 2; see also Scopacasa 2014, 244). Rafael

Scopacasa compares the artifacts found in Samnium tombs ranging from the sixth to the third century BCE in an effort to uncover the gender dynamics of this pre-Roman society (Scopacasa 2014, 241). It seems that while both weapons and personal ornaments were present, the objects did not have strongly gendered connotations. Such artifacts could indicate gender to some extent, but the evidence from burials points to a stronger association with status (Scopacasa 2014, 248). Though at first glance weapons would seem to represent masculinity and personal ornaments represent femininity, further analysis shows that even within gender boundaries, these burial objects are reserved for those in a restricted or special social class (Scopacasa 2014, 248). Of the cemeteries that Scopacasa uses in his analysis, San Vincenzo al Volturno was analyzed more recently, with a broader focus on not only age and sex but also diet, nutrition, stress, and injuries (Scopacasa 2014, 246). The overlap across these six factors showed that, around the sixth century BCE, men and women carried out the same types of daily activities and were subject to similar diets and diseases (Scopacasa 2014, 249). The skeletal analysis at San Vincenzo reveals a slightly more egalitarian society than the rigidly gendered one of Rome (Scopacasa 2014, 249).

This trend of similar lifestyles continues into the fifth century, with the largest amount of evidence coming from Campo Consolino, a funerary site in central Italy (Scopacasa 2014, 249). Evidence from the site aligns with that of the earlier burials at San Vincenzo, with weapons and personal ornaments correlating with both status and gender identity (Scopacasa 2014, 250). Scopacasa suggests that because weapon burials were rare and present in both male and female burials, weapons were primarily an indicator of status rather than gender

(Scopacasa 2014, 251). It is possible that, although weaponry was associated with masculinity, weapons present in female burials elevated status by highlighting the woman's association with high-status males (Scopacasa 2014, 251; see also Herring 2019, 92; Carpenter, Lynch, and Robinson 2014, 26). Personal ornaments, particularly fibulae, are also present in both male and female burials, although they are mostly concentrated in high-status burials among women and young men (Scopacasa 2014, 251, 253). The presence of personal ornaments in young male graves brings into question the construction of gender (Scopacasa 2014, 253). Scopacasa proposes two explanations: a "one-gender" system where any non-adult male would be lumped into a single category, or that the *types* of ornamentation differentiated genders, rather than attributing all personal ornamentation to women.

Southern Italian tombs were not defined solely by weapons or personal ornaments. In Samnium, drinking vessels are found in both male and female burials. Drinking vessels are crucial to understanding gender dynamics as they served "as vehicles for social interaction centered on drinking, which can occur as part of funerary ritual as well as in nonfunerary contexts" (Scopacasa 2014, 256). The distribution of drink is a reciprocal activity which, when not all parties can reciprocate, enforces social inequalities (Scopacasa 2014, 256). An individual's social status could be communicated through the quality of the drinking vessels and the prestige of the drink (Scopacasa 2014, 256). The sociopolitical aspect of drinking—also referred to as "commensal politics"—was evidently important enough in Samnium society to be included in burials and, on top of that, in the burials of both men and women (Scopacasa 2014, 257). The wealth of female

burials, coupled with the fine drinking ware, suggests that women not only participated in these drinking events but also organized and hosted them themselves (Scopacasa 2014, 258). By hosting these events, women became the agents of social power, playing into a display of power that communicates their own status, rather than that of their husbands or fathers. The gender dynamics of commensal politics also arise in Apulian tombs. In a series of fourth-century tombs in Canosa, female and male burials held very similar ceramic assemblages with identical functions and shapes (Carpenter, Lynch, and Robinson 2014, 180). Burials often included drinking vessels, which could be linked either to funerary rituals or symposium-style feasting practices (Carpenter, Lynch, and Robinson 2014, 180). In both Samnium and Apulia, the widespread presence of drinking vessels in funerary contexts not only highlights the ritual significance of these artifacts but also the ability of both men and women to participate in these events. Moving forward into the late fifth to third century BCE, evidence from other Samnite cemeteries "suggest gender systems in which differences in daily activities were not based on the biological sex divide" (Scopacasa 2014, 263).

Other burial evidence—particularly spindles—prompts a connection between femininity and textile production. Female burial assemblages often contained spindles, which strengthens the connections between women and weaving (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 106). In both Samnium and Apulia, textile production was crucial to the economy, as indicated by the sheer amount of loom weights found in sites across southern Italy (Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 105; see also Herring 2019, 93). The ritual significance of weaving carries on through votive offerings found in sanctuaries. Loom

weights found at sanctuaries indicate that weaving possibly took place within these religious environments (Sofroniew 2011, 193-194). While many scholars argue that the loom weights are simply remains of sacred weaving, Alexandra Sofroniew proposes that loom weights themselves were used as votive offerings, particularly by women (Sofroniew 2011, 197, 200). Women have dedicated a variety of household objects to the gods, including loom weights (Sofroniew 2011, 198). Loom weights may also be stamped with words or letters marking the name of the maker or owner, most of which are female names (Sofroniew 2011, 200). Other decorations on the loom weights, including depictions of fibulae and tweezers, further cement their association with femininity<sup>1</sup>. Loom weights would have been dedicated to specific deities who—based on situational context—were chosen for their significance to weaving (Sofroniew 2011, 204).

This association with weaving also appears in artistic depictions, particularly funerary art. Stelae, which are characteristic of Iron Age Daunia, include depictions of weaving that strengthen Sofroniew's argument about the ritual significance of the activity (Norman 2016, 868). Though the Daunians did not develop a written language, they left behind a series of richly decorated stelae with depictions of ordinary life and spiritual scenes (Norman 2016, 865, 868). Unfortunately, not a single stela has been found in its primary context, which means that none of them can be concretely associated with a sexed individual nor can they solely and certainly be applied to funerary contexts (Norman 2016, 868-869;

see also Norman 2009, 38). Nonetheless, the depictions on the stelae provide a rare voice for these pre-Roman women. By the Iron Age, depictions of female figures on stelae were defined by “ornamentation and the possession of weaving and spinning paraphernalia.” A common scene on stelae depicts a procession in which “two files of women, one headed by a lone male, coming together over an object that is either a handloom or lyre” (Norman 2016, 874). Norman proposes that this procession was an exchange of gifts between two families that were to be joined through marriage (Norman 2016, 874). The frequency of this scene on stelae associated with females suggests not only the significance of the ritual in itself but also “how significant female roles were in weaving, religion, and the maintenance of elite familial relations” (Herring 2019, 93; see also Norman 2016, 874). Camilla Norman argues that the prevalence of weaving on stelae—which are assumed to be commemorative ritual monuments—also suggests that weaving was a source of pride for the community (Norman 2016, 874). Beyond the economic significance of textile production, weaving was also ritually important to women, possibly *because* of its economic power. Throughout pre-Roman southern Italy, textile production was essential to the local economy, and weaving was largely a female activity (Carpenter, Lynch, and Robinson 2014, 17; see also Schnieder-Herrmann 1996, 105).

As is evident in the procession depicted on the stelae, women participated in ritual ceremonies alongside men—often in the context of courtship and marriage—although they were also included in libation

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<sup>1</sup> As Sofroniew (2011, 201-202) has argued, fibulae and tweezers are not inherently gendered, although

when considered in conjunction with other gendered aspects of the loom weights, they add to the gendered symbolism of the weights.

and funerary rituals (Schneider-Herrmann 1996, 113). The woman's agency is not overshadowed, though, as depictions on Daunian stelae suggest that women were responsible for organizing, preparing, and conducting ceremonies (Norman 2016, 874). Herring argues that through these roles—both in the religious and domestic realms—women could have built status separate from their relations with men. This argument is reflected in Scopacasa's Samnite burial analysis, where the presence of drinking vessels in tombs indicates that women were able to build wealth and status on their own (Scopacasa 2014, 258). The abundance of high-status stelae with female-associated depictions also suggests that not only were women able to build their own status but could enjoy a relatively high level of wealth with accordingly well-furnished burials (Herring 2019, 94).

### Conclusion

Approaches to gender in Roman archaeology are often divided along the lines of prehistoric and classical archaeology (Herring and Lomas 2009, 1). A significant amount of gender archaeology in antiquity has focused on Greek and Roman culture, while much less work has been conducted on other Italic cultures (Herring and Lomas 2009, 1). Unlike Greece, which developed a more unified ethnic identity by the fifth century BCE, Italy was defined by a collection of ethnicities scattered across the peninsula (Herring and Lomas 2009, 1). A distinctly Roman perception of the Italian peninsula did not begin to clearly form until the late third-century BCE (Dench 2005, 153). Even as centuries of pre-Roman cultures are visible in the archaeological record, the study of gender within these cultures has not been fully considered (Herring and Lomas 2009, 1). Many scholars

have assumed that the gender dynamics of regions like Samnium or Apulia were nearly identical to those of ancient Rome, although ongoing research challenges this notion (Scopacasa 2014, 241). As both Herring and Lomas argue, the relationship between gender and ethnicity should not be diminished (Herring and Lomas 2009, 5). Gender roles must be examined through the broader lens of ethnicity, along with other factors of identity (Herring and Lomas 2009, 5). The variety of ethnic identities in the Italian peninsula suggests a similarly diverse set of gender dynamics that can be observed and analyzed in order to deepen our knowledge of gender in antiquity as a whole.

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