

# Dance and games offer glimpses of life, and death, in ancient Italy

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Tomb and urn images shed light on the intricacies of Etruscan and Roman civilization at least 2,000 years ago, reviving it for modern times.

A 2,500-year-old Etruscan tomb in the Italian city of Tarquinia has walls covered in paintings of brightly colored dancers and musicians. A 1st-

century funerary urn of a woman who died in nearby Rome depicts a couple playing a board game.

While tombs and urns might seem to be unlikely places to find scenes of people dancing or playing [board games](#), in classical antiquity they conveyed important messages about personal relationships and society.

## **Game of seduction**

The Roman marble urn, for example, bears an inscription identifying the deceased woman as Margaris, a slave of Marcus Allius Herma. The couple is playing "Little Soldiers," a game of strategy symbolizing seduction, and Margaris is winning.

"The image of the board game shows intimacy between the couple," said Véronique Dasen, professor of classical archaeology at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. "It is a very beautiful thing because she is a slave, but she's also the beloved one and the leader. The game is also a message to say they will be together forever."

Although games were an important part of ancient life—even the gods played them—for a long time they went unstudied. The only major work on the topic was published in 1869.

Dasen is leading a research project called [Locus Ludi](#) to address this gap. It is carrying out the first comprehensive study of the written, archaeological and iconographic records of games, which have been largely forgotten in museums and libraries.

## **Beastly boys, good girls**

Some Roman sarcophagi of children are carved with scenes of boys

playing. These are no simple illustrations of childhood amusement—they have a twist.

The beautiful carvings show the boys fighting over their game and pulling each other's hair. One boy is even biting his playmate.

This reflects the extent to which violence was allowed in games and was culturally part of the fun, according to Dasen. Romans valued this behavior.

Roman girls, on the other hand, were never depicted fighting over games. Instead, they are always shown playing nicely and quietly.

Such pastimes were a way for children to experience winning and losing and to learn to master their emotions.

## **Play it again**

In addition to studying the hidden messages in the images of games in ancient Roman as well as Greek art, the Locus Ludi team has recreated some and made them available to [play online](#).

The "Little Soldiers" amusement played by the slave and her lover is the only Roman strategic board game described in detail in Roman literature.



Etruscan urn with female slave and master over board game. Credit: © Véronique Dasen, 2019

The researchers used these descriptions and [archaeological finds](#) to recreate the [rules](#) of the game so that it can be played again today, along with several other ancient pastimes that have been made accessible to modern-day players.

The aim is to help integrate ancient games as cultural material in school and university programs today, according to Dasen.

Knowing more about the educational and societal role of play in the past

is important to understand the present and widen the debate about high-tech toys and new forms of sociability. Locus Ludi started in 2017 and runs through September this year.

## **Female authority**

Unlike the ancient Romans and Greeks, women in Etruscan society had equal status to men. The Etruscans controlled central Italy before the region became part of the Roman empire. Many of their rituals were adopted by the Romans.

The Greeks were shocked by the status that Etruscan women had and described them as women of ill repute," said Dr. Audrey Gouy, an archaeologist specializing in pre-Roman Italy at the University of Lille in France.

Scenes painted in underground tombs in Tarquinia not only show women and men dancing together as equals, they also depict the females as leaders in their community.

The dancers are performing an ancient funeral ritual. A woman playing castanets leads them. Bands of sacred cloth are draped over her arms—a symbol of her religious authority.

"This woman controlled the ritual," said Gouy, who was the first person to study Etruscan dance. The castanet player led people through the ritual's different stages. She opened up a connection between the world of the living and the world of the dead, helping the deceased pass through. Dance at a funeral also served people coping with grief, according to Gouy. "Dance has a psychological effect on the body that helps to heal after a death," she said.

Gouy studied textiles in Etruscan art as part of a project called

[TEXDANCE](#), which ended in 2021, and published a book on the subject last year.

## Costume signals

She said researching the dancers' clothes in paintings and carvings reveals a lot about their movements and the sounds they made.

"Through the clothes we can see the different phases of the dance," Gouy said.

The garments in the tombs show that the dancers move slowly at first, then spin and leap faster and faster. Gouy—herself a dancer—is planning to recreate these clothes and make a video of their movements to show how the ritual might have been performed.

In addition to clothes, male and female dancers wore bracelets and belts, which would have jangled as they moved.

The women's accessories may have given light, high-pitched sounds. The men's belts bore larger objects that may have sounded like a low-pitched rattle.

The possible differences of sound between young men and women in dance led Gouy to think that there may have been a sort of [gender soundscape](#) in Etruscan dance.

"The Tarquinian tombs fascinate me because the Etruscans created an envelope of paintings around their dead to protect them for all eternity," she said. "They are full of representations of joy, of life, and they tell us so much about Etruscan society."

### More information:

- [Locus Ludi](#)
- [TEXDANCE](#)
- [EU-funded research and innovation on cultural heritage](#)

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