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## The Chthonic Roots of Leonardo da Vinci's Youthful Iconography

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### ABSTRACT

Background: Leonardo da Vinci painted some of the most iconic works of the High Renaissance, and yet some of their iconographic features remain largely unexamined, as do the relevant large-scale conventions of Christian iconography and the Etruscan roots of the Humanist tradition of the period.

Problem statement: An unusual feature that is found in most of Leonardo da Vinci's depictions of the Virgin Mary is a striking yellow or golden sash around her waist. Such a feature is not found in prior depictions of this central figure of Christian iconography, and in only a few of the works of his immediate pupils, and is thus largely unique to Leonardo. As such, it calls for an analytic appraisal of its derivation as a symbolic trope in his youthful works.

Proposition: An association with the myth of Persephone is developed on the basis of several features of his 'Virgin of the Rocks' in particular, in which a yellow sash is a central motif. This mythic identification in turn helps to account for the substantial deviation of this work from the specification of its original commission into an extreme version of the mountainous setting that is common to most of Leonardo's established works. The roots of this symbolism are then considered in relation to the Etruscan resonances of the Florentine milieu in which Leonardo matured.

**Keywords:** Leonardo da Vinci; iconography; Greek mythology; Persephone; Narcissus; Hades

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### 1. Introduction

The typical approach to Leonardo da Vinci scholarship is either to focus on a particular work, such as recent analyses of the 'Virgin of the Rocks' (National Gallery, London) by Blatt (2018) and Kharibian (2018) or general biographies of his life and works (such as Thiis, 1913; Clark & Kemp, 1989; or Kemp, 2019). Here the approach is to focus on a unique feature of Leonardo's iconography that has escaped notice in previous analyses of Leonardo's works, a prominent yellow sash or waistband in all

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his depictions of the Virgin Mary, whose depiction is one of the key themes of his painted works. This motif is placed in the historical context of the Virgin's attire, which itself has not been given a full historical analysis, but is now shown to have been highly consistent over more than a millennium after the first depictions in the late Roman era (despite the individual artistic creativity in varying its expression from one painter to the next).

A key feature of the Renaissance was the Humanist integration of the Christian religion of the mediaeval period with the heroic and classical religions traditions of the Mediterranean past, including in particular the Etruscan culture of Northern Italy where Leonardo da Vinci grew up to maturity. The iconography of his innovative conception of the golden yellow sash is therefore traced in terms of the classical Greek and Etruscan allusions that Leonardo may have been referencing, and related to those to the Etruscan remnants that he would have encountered.

The approach taken in these conceptual developments is iconographic analysis of subthemes in the major works available in the referenced periods. The themes of the Virgin's attire relative to historical conventions, its Christian and classical symbolism, and the relationships to Etruscan secular pictorial motifs, are all considered in relation to the relevant works of Leonardo da Vinci and to the Florentine Renaissance culture as a whole.

## 2. The Madonnas of Leonardo da Vinci

In fact, the total acknowledged output in Leonardo's first decade of artistic activity, from one of the acknowledged geniuses of the Renaissance, was one portrait, two 'Madonna and Child' depictions,



Figure 1. Details of the Virgin from the 'Annunciation'; 'Madonna of the Carnation'; 'Benois Madonna'; 'Madonna with Saints John the Baptist and Donatus'; Louvre 'Virgin of the Rocks'; London 'Virgin of the Rocks'; and 'Virgin and Child with Saint Anne'.

one 'Madonna of the Annunciation' and the cartoon for the 'Adoration of the Magi'. What is striking is that, in addition to the traditional red robe and blue cloak of almost all depictions of her in this era (Fig. 1, top row), the three painted Madonnas all have the conspicuous addition of a bright yellow or golden coloured sash at the waist. The works are the Virgin from the 'Annunciation' by Verrocchio / Leonardo da Vinci / Lorenzo di Credi (1472-5, Uffizi, Florence), the 'Madonna of the Carnation' (1480), the 'Benois Madonna' (~1476, Hermitage, St Petersburg) by Leonardo da Vinci; and the 'Madonna with Saints John the Baptist and Donatus' by Verrocchio / Lorenzo di Credi / Leonardo da Vinci<sup>2</sup>.

As shown in Fig. 1 (bottom row), the iconographic element of the yellow sash is continued in the 'Virgin of the Rocks' by Leonardo da Vinci (the first version from 1483-6 at the Louvre, Paris, begun in the first year that he arrived in Milan; the second by Leonardo da Vinci/Ambrogio de Predis (1495-1506, National Gallery, London); and the 'Virgin and Child with Saint Anne' by Leonardo da Vinci (~1503; Louvre, Paris). A close-up view of each of the sashes is provided in Fig. 2. In the 'Madonna of the Carnation' and 'Virgin of the Rocks' versions, in particular, the sash seems to burst forth in a shocking announcement of its presence at the core of the virginal body. It is remarkable that this motif is absent from depictions by all his contemporaries (other than one or two of his pupils), so it represents iconographic thinking unique to Leonardo, though apparently entirely unremarked in subsequent art-historical analysis. The derivation of this yellow sash motif is therefore the guiding theme of the present analysis.



Figure 2. Close-up details of the sashes from Fig. 1.

One issue in this characterisation is that the folds of the purported sash in Leonardo's 'Madonna and Child with Saint Anne' appear to be in a rather similar colour to the chemise just above it. To verify that the sash is in fact a different colour from the red chemise, it may be compared with those in the two close copies by his pupils Bernardo Luini (1530, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles) and Francesco Melzi (~1525, Prado, Madrid) (Fig. 3). In both cases, the sash is clearly distinct from the vermillion chemise in being a golden yellow colour. It is therefore evident that Leonardo's original colours must have been the traditional deep blue cloak (as opposed to the light blue of its present condition) and vermillion dress, with the addition of his innovation of a golden yellow sash. Note also that both of these pupils replicate the unstable pose of the feet hanging over the precipice in the foreground, although staying true to the spirit of the icy blue mountain vista in the background despite significant variations in the details.

The one Leonardo Madonna that does not incorporate a sash, yellow or otherwise, is the 'Madonna of the Yarnwinder', a late work contemporary with the 'Mona Lisa', although a consensus autograph version has not been established and 29 versions are listed in a Wikipedia analysis<sup>3</sup>). At least one of these 'Madonna of the Yarnwinder' versions and related works (by Almedina) does in fact have a yellow sash.

<sup>2</sup>The author attributions are integrated over a range of publications, not necessarily those provided by their host institutions.

<sup>3</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madonna\\_of\\_the\\_Yarnwinder#List\\_of\\_copies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madonna_of_the_Yarnwinder#List_of_copies); accessed 7/7/2109.



Figure 3. Leonardo's 'Virgin and Child with Saint Anne' (left) with two early 16th century copies attributed to two of his close pupils, verifying that the Virgin in Leonardo's original is wearing a golden yellow sash distinct

### 3. Liturgical colours

A Catholic glossary of the liturgical meanings attributable to the various colours used for religious attire provides the following definitions:

Black: Solemnity, negation, sickness, death.

Black and White: Humility, purity of life.

Black and Red: Satan.

Blue: Heavenly love, unveiling of truth. Traditional colour of St. Mary, the Blessed Virgin. Azure blue pigment was always the most expensive and thus the only paint colour considered worthy to use in images of the Virgin.

Brown: Renunciation of the world, spiritual death and degradation.

Gray: Ashes, humility, mourning. the mortality of the body and the immortality of the soul.

Green: Spring, triumph of life over death, charity, regeneration of soul through good works, hope.

Pink: Grace, perfect happiness, gentility, admiration.

Purple: Royalty, imperial power (God the Father).

Red: Love, hate, sovereign power.

Red and White: Unity.

Violet: Love, truth, passion, suffering. The colour of the Mater Dolorosa either somewhere on her clothing or as a background colour, sometimes a pale violet.

White [and/or Gold]: Innocence of soul, purity, holiness of life. The colour of Jesus' robe at and after the Resurrection; the colour of the Virgin's robe at the Immaculate Conception and Assumption.

Golden Yellow: The sun's glory, the bounty of God, marriage, fertility, Divine light.

Pale Yellow: Dingy; infernal light, degradation, jealousy, treason, deceit, the colour of Judas' robe in art.

(From the website of the Catholic Tradition<sup>4</sup>).

It may therefore be taken from this glossary that the blue of Mary's cloak represents her heavenly love for humankind, that the red of her robe represents her sovereign power over the dominion of the faithful, and that the gold trim of her cloak represents the purity of the immaculate conception. The description of the meaning of golden yellow gives a wide scope for the interpretation of da Vinci's intent in including it as the colour of the sash in his Madonnas: the sun's glory, the bounty of God, marriage, fertility, Divine light. The first term sounds surprisingly atavistic for inclusion in a

<sup>4</sup><http://www.catholictradition.org/Saints/signs6.htm>; accessed 7/7/2109.

Catholic concordance; the second seems too traditional to be likely to be the focus of da Vinci's innovation; the next two also seem antithetical to his lifelong unmarried state and lack of interest in women. Hence the most likely of these concepts to correspond to da Vinci's intent is the final interpretation: that the golden yellow of the Virgin's sashes as an evocation of the Divine light that is felt in her presence.

It is generally accepted among Leonardo's biographers, from Thiis (1913) to Kemp (2019), that Leonardo's evident feeling for the Virgin Mary probably derived from his experiences when visiting his natural mother, Caterina, whom his father Piero da Vinci had arranged to be married to a nearby neighbor, Acchattabrigio di Piero del Vaccha. As Jens Thiis explains it: "According to his grandfather's own statement in the taxation return (in the archives of Florence), the year of Leonardo's birth must have been 1452; for in 1457 the whole family still lived together with the old Antonio, and he, in his character of head of the family, put Leonardo down as son of the said notary Piero, illegitimate child of him and Caterina, the present wife of Acchattabrigio di Piero del Vaccha of Vinci, five years of age.' Thus while Caterina was married to a peasant from Vinci, the notary, during the year in which the child was born, married a Florentine lady of good birth, Albiera Arnadori. The marriage was childless, however, and the couple, in accordance with the custom of the time, took Ser Piero's child to live with them."

What Thiis and others were suggesting is that young Leonardo was living with his grandfather, Antonio da Vinci, and would have had the opportunity to visit his natural mother, Caterina, in her nearby home. Leonardo is often understood to have developed his image of motherly love from such visits, as she would have loved him but would have had her own children around her to give him the image of the mother and child that he purveyed in his works (Freud, 1955). On this reading, the consistently warm, earthy look of his Madonnas would essentially have been portraits of this young peasant woman who was his natural mother.

#### 4. A brief history of Marian attire

In evaluating the uniqueness of Leonardo's inclusion of the yellow sash in his works, it is important to place it in the context of the history of Marian depictions: were they consistent among artists or varied according to artistic preference? Did the choice of colours for the Mary figure evolve over time or remain consistent through the centuries? These questions will be considered in terms of the historical customs in three time periods: up to the mid-15th century, the decades of Leonardo's youth and maturity in the later 15th century, and those of his pupils at the turn of the 16th century.

#### Earliest Madonnas



Figure 4. Examples of the earliest depictions of the Virgin and Child.

Looking at the history of depictions of the Virgin Mary, we find that the earliest known depictions of the Madonna, beginning in the 5th century, in which she is depicting wearing a hooded cloak of deep blue, her undergarments mostly covered (Fig. 4). The works are: the 'Madonna del

Conforto', attributed to St Luke (439, S. Maria Antiqua, Rome); 'Madonna and Child between Angels' (~450, Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna); 'Madonna di San Sisto' attributed to St Luke (C6th, S. Maria del Rosario a Monte Mario); and 'Virgin and Child with Saints' (C6th, St Catherine's Monastery, Egypt). The blue cloak tradition was maintained over the centuries into the Middle Ages, when there developed a consensus that Jesus would be depicted in vermilion red that tends to surprise modern sensibilities, but presumably represents the love of humanity that he is considered to have expressed. As seen in Fig. 5 (upper row) the Virgin's cloak typically had a red lining resonating with the garments of Jesus, and the Virgin's undergarments were beginning to be revealed. The respective images are 'Virgin Hodegetria' by Berlinghiero of Lucca, (~1230, NY Met); 'Virgin Enthroned with Angels' by Cimabue, c-1290-95, Louvre, Paris); 'Strogonoff Madonna' by Duccio di Buoninsegna (~1300, NY Met); 'Ognissanti Madonna' by Giotto di Bondone (~1310, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence); 'Madonna and Child' by Pietro Cavallini (Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome); 'Madonna and Child' by Simone Martini, (~1326, NY Met).

### Roman Catholic Madonnas in blue cloaks with gold trim and red Jesus



### Byzantine Madonnas in red cloaks with blue dress and gold trim



Figure 5. Examples of Mediaeval depictions of the Virgin and Child from the Roman Catholic and the Byzantine traditions, exemplifying their complementary colour schemes of a red cloak with a blue dress.

In the same period, the Byzantine icons descended from the Eastern half of the Roman empire show a dramatic inversion of the colour scheme (Fig. 5, lower row), with the Virgin's outer cloak depicted as red in combination with blue and gold undergarments (when they were visible). The icons in this set are: 'Virgin Hodegetria' (~1150, Byzantine Museum, Kastoria); 'Virgin Eleousa' by Angelos Akotantos (~1440, Cleveland Museum of Art); 'Hodegetria' (~1450, Byzantine Museum, Athens); and the 'Virgin Hodegetria of Smolensk' (~1590, Hermitage, St Petersburg). Presumably this radical inversion of the long-established Marian colour scheme, which had been consistent for many hundreds of years, can be understood as deriving from the rivalry and political wrangling between the Eastern and Western derivatives of the split in the Roman Empire instigated by Emperor Constantine in the 4th century, which had even adopted different forms of writing (the Roman versus the Cyrillic alphabets) by the ninth century. It is not entirely surprising, then, that the depiction of the Madonna would be similarly switch-coded from about the same era. (It is nevertheless noteworthy that Cyril was canonized by the

Roman church, with his body retrieved in a special expedition to the Northern Black Sea and given a church burial at the Church of San Clemente in Rome).

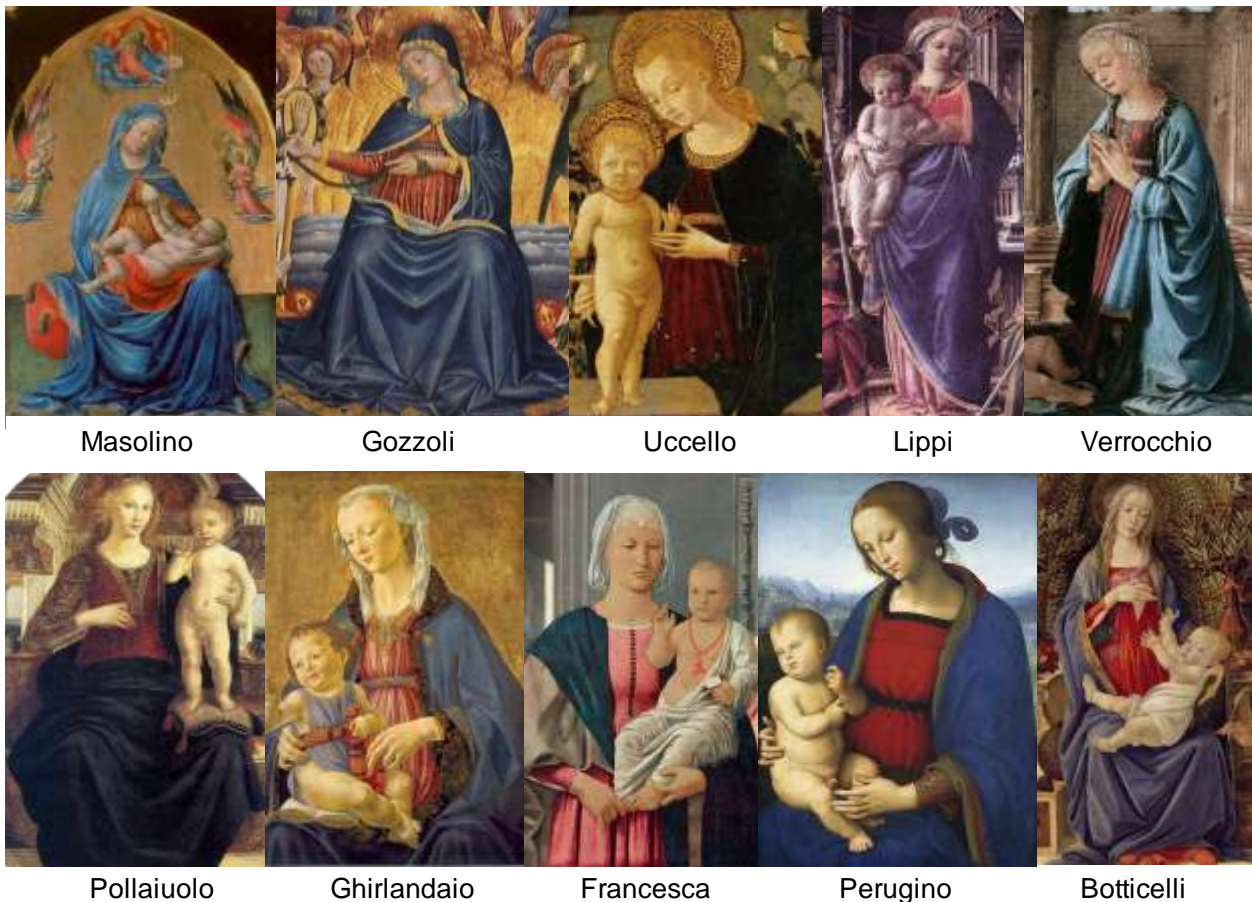


Figure 6. Examples of Madonnas from the 15th century exhibiting the persistent blue and red colour scheme for her garments, a subset with gold belts, in the period immediately preceding Leonardo's depictions (upper row) and among Leonardo's contemporaries (lower row). Note that none of them has any kind of sash across the

By the International Gothic period of roughly 1350-1450, the standard garb for a Madonna was still a blue hooded robe, representing devout holiness, but the dress was now in full evidence and uniformly red (Fig. 5; 'Holy Mother and Child' by Masolino di Panicale (~1435, Uffizi, Florence); 'Madonna of the Girdle' by Benozzo Gozzoli (~1452, Vatican, Rome). It is not entirely obvious what the red of her dress may be understood to represent, since she has lost the white that represented the purity of her immaculate conception, and the red seems too close to an evocation of profane love to be a plausible substitute. It may be that its artistic effectiveness as a colour combination overrode explicit consideration of its symbolic role.

A selection of Madonnas from Leonardo's older contemporaries is shown in Fig. 6, evincing the absence of a yellow sash (although some have yellow lining or gold trim to the cloak). These are the 'Holy Mother and Child' by Masolino di Panicale (~1435, Uffizi, Florence); 'Madonna of the Girdle' by Benozzo Gozzoli (~1452, Vatican, Rome); 'Madonna and Child' attr. Paolo Uccello (~1460, loc unk); 'Barbadori Altarpiece' by Filippo Lippi (~1438, Louvre, Paris); 'Madonna and Child' by Piero del Pollaiuolo (~1480; Hermitage, St Petersburg); 'Madonna and Child' by Domenico Ghirlandaio (~1480, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC); 'Madonna di Senigallia' by Piero della Francesca (~1474, Ducal Palace, Urbino); 'Madonna and Child' by Pietro Perugino (1501, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC); 'Bardi Altarpiece' by Sandro Botticelli (~1485, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin).

It is noteworthy that all adhere to the same Western tradition of the blue cloak and the red dress, although the humanistic spirit of the Early Renaissance among Leonardo's contemporaries frees Mary from the previously ubiquitous hood, revealing her generally blonde or auburn hair in an array of appealing styles, some including a semi-transparent lace or silk cap. She still wears a full red dress down to her feet, with the gold trim of the robe being elaborated to a golden braided belt that seems to be consistently high-waisted just below the breasts, in the 'Empire' style later popularized by the

French Empress Josephine. Thus, the consistent colour scheme of the blue cloak over the red dress persisted into the 15th century even while being liberalized toward the Botticellian classical freedom of spirit, in a characteristic expression of the integrative spiritual innovations of the era.



Figure 7. Examples of Madonnas with yellow sashes from Leonardo's pupils and younger contemporaries, from around the turn of the 15th century.

### 5. Classical resonance with the myth of Persephone

A clue to this iconography may be found in the explicitly chthonic resonance of the 'Virgin of the Rocks', in which a prime example of the golden yellow sash is in evidence. In a radical deviation from the explicit commission from the nuns of the Annunciata, Leonardo has placed the Virgin and her companions deep in the recesses of a cavern of batholithic rocks, evoking the sense of redemption from a chthonic underworld. Indeed, one aspect of both versions of the 'Virgin of the Rocks' that has rarely been commented is the way that the ground falls disconcertingly away below the feet of the infant Jesus. In the London version (Fig. 2), the child almost seems to be hovering above the precipice, about to slip into the chasm but for the protection of guardian angel. The same feature is again evident below the ambiguous feet of the two mothers in Leonardo's 'Virgin and Child with Saint Anne' (Fig. 3, lower right). Thus, Leonardo seems to be drawing attention to this highly atypical aspect of this compositional theme in that, rather than being sheltered in the arms of the Virgin Mary, the infant Jesus is almost reveling in the danger of being perched on a cliff-edge in these cavernous surroundings. (The alternative interpretation is that the foreground space in these paintings represents mountain pool, but although this is plausible for the Louvre version, it does not seem to be supported by the London version or the foreground in the 'Virgin and Child with Saint Anne', which both give the impression of the edge of a vertical cliff with empty space in front of it.)

(Another incongruous aspect of the composition that has remained unresolved is the reversal of the expected positions of the young Jesus and John the Baptist figures, with the Baptist being under the "misericordia" shelter of Virgin's cloak, while Jesus is outside the line of the cloak under the ambivalent gesture of the Virgin's outstretched fingers. This hand almost appears to be sensing a force-field emanating from Jesus' head, though interpreted as a protective gesture in the National Gallery



description of the painting. Although the painting has been the subject of multifold interpretations from numerous sources, none seem to have come up with an integrated account of these features.)

The classical figure immediately evoked by the golden yellow of the Virgin's sash in Leonardo's depictions (Fig. 2) is Persephone, the symbol of springtime in classical Greek and Etruscan mythology. This identification is supported by Leonardo's unique imagery of the angelic figures emerging from the deep winter of the cavernous Hadean depths. The yellow narcissus flowers that represent the beauty of Persephone that attracted Hades unwanted attentions are quite reminiscent of the flowers highlighted in the foreground of the London version of the 'Virgin of the Rocks' (detail enlarged in Fig. 8B). Each flower has a ring of six white petal-like tepals surrounding a central golden corona. This depiction is counterposed in Fig. 8B with a photograph of a modern domesticated version of the narcissus flower, which has very much the same features. It should be recognized that there is a wide variety of related species with the same general character under the same name (and indeed the several alternative names of narcissus, jonquil, daffodil, nargis, pheasant's eye, or lenten lily). Leonardo himself changed the appearance of these foreground flowers between the two versions of the paintings, causing confusion in the identification of their species. Their depiction in the Louvre version is more like the wild mountain versions of the flower, and has a non-descript colour that thwarts accurate identification, but the present comparison with the narcissus in the London version in Fig. 8A, each with the central yellow cone and the ring of six white sepals, is difficult to gainsay.

The story of Persephone was that she was captured by the god of the underworld when she was picking narcissus flowers. Moreover, the mythical Hades was described as emerging from a yawning cleft that opened in the ground in front of her, which could explain the way that the ground falls so disconcertingly away in front of the figures in these paintings. Persephone was rescued from the underworld by Hermes the Messenger, but he only succeeded in freeing her for half of each year, after which she had to return to take her place as queen of the underworld. She thus represented the cycle of the seasons, and narcissus represent her annual springtime return to the human domain. It therefore seems likely that Leonardo had spent time with the classical revivalists of the Medici court of Florence, and was aware of this classical symbolism which he introduced into his depictions of the Virgin Mary as a parallel to the mythical Persephone.

One of the first books Leonardo acquired in the 1470s was a copy of the mythological sourcebook – an Italian translation of Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' by Arrigo de' Simintendi, and he owned



Figure 8A. 'Virgin of the Rocks' by Leonardo da Vinci (1495-1506, National Gallery, London).



Figure 8B. Comparison of foreground flowers in Fig. 2 with a photograph of narcissus flowers.

at least one book by the Medici Humanist Poggio Bracciolini (Vecce, 2017). To strengthen the case for Leonardo's interest in classical mythology, we may refer to Brown & Oberhuber (1999): "The range of Leonardo's oeuvre would undoubtedly have been more typical of the Renaissance had his drawings of erotic mythological subjects not been burned in the eighteenth century. ... Amoretti makes specific reference to information concerning "alcuni disegni in grande di donne e divinate ignudi, come di Proserpina rapita di Plutone, di Ninfa che medica un Satiro, ..." ["various drawings of nude women and goddesses, such as Proserpine being raped by Pluto, and nymphs taking care of a Satyr"]. Thus a direct connection to the myth of Persephone is established in the writings of Leonardo (Amoretti, 1804).



Figure 9. Two paintings of the abduction of Proserpina by Pluto, by Leonardo's closest pupil, Francesco Melzi, supporting the supposition that Leonardo was familiar with the myth of Persephone (Proserpina): 'Abduction of Proserpina' and 'Pluto and Proserpina'.

We thus have four features of the painting relating to the Persephone myth: the Hadean surroundings, the yellow narcissus, the yawning cavern in the foreground, and the golden yellow sash. This multifold identification of Leonardo's interest in the myth of Persephone raises the question, however, of why there are no extant examples of this myth in his works. A parallel line of reasoning can be followed to surmise that Leonardo had developed his own works on the theme of Persephone, by inference from two paintings by his closest pupil (and executor of his estate when he died), Francesco Melzi. As reproduced in Fig. 9, these paintings depict the abduction of Proserpina by Pluto (the Roman names for Persephone and Hades). Tellingly, in both pictures Proserpina is wearing some form of golden yellow girdle or sash, though more evident in the later than the earlier picture. So it seems highly plausible that Leonardo had painted or drawn his own versions of these works from which the Melzi panels were derived. What is clear is that they evince the extreme forms of gestural expressivity and contrapposto that is found in Leonardo's 'Last Supper' and 'Battle of Anghiari' (and is not characteristic of Melzi's own original works, in which the figures have somewhere between relaxed and stilted), further supporting the inference of their derivation of the Proserpina panels from lost works of his master. These two works thus form evidence of Leonardo's direct interest in the myth of Persephone.

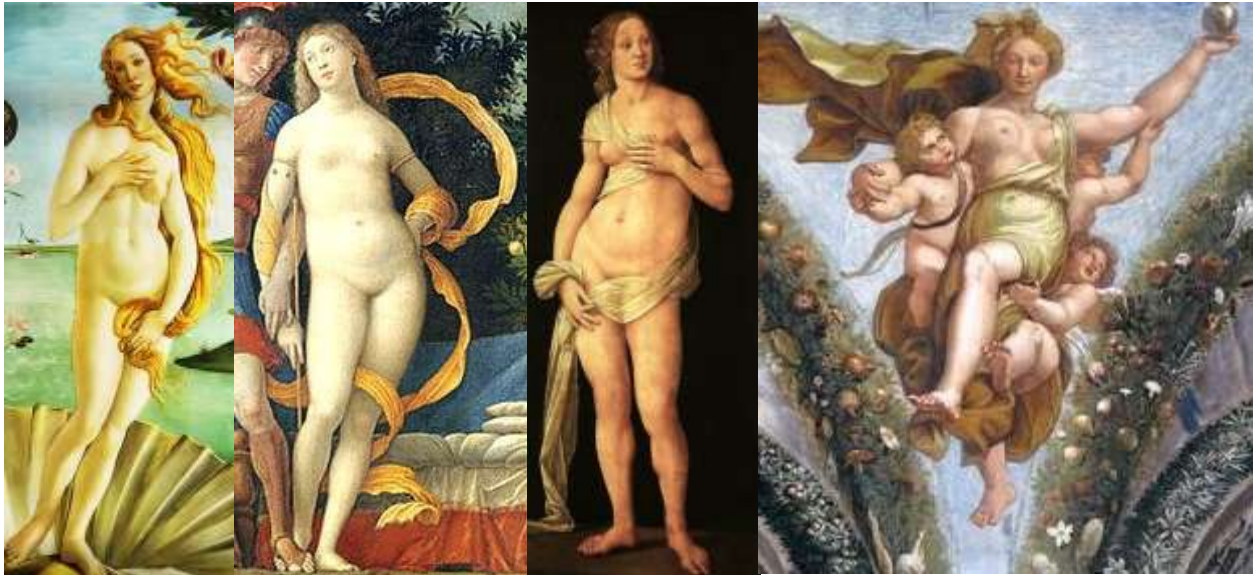


Figure 10. Examples of Renaissance depictions of Venus with a windblown yellow sash or suggestion of it, from Botticelli, Mantegna, di Credi and Raphael.

In Leonardo's youth, Persephone, or Proserpina, was widely featured in the Roman paintings that were just beginning to be discovered by the Humanist investigations that were being funded by the Medici, although their focus was on the literature and sculpture from the Roman era rather than the wall paintings. Indeed, the Medici sculpture garden of such classical sculptures is widely renowned for having been a source of employment for both Leonardo and Michelangelo. However, there is no record of any interest in historical Roman frescos during the Renaissance, even though they were reportedly common in the villas around Rome, as many of seventy of which were destroyed by a Counter-Reformation Pope. A range of vase- and wall-paintings featuring Persephone as the Queen of the Underworld or as a participant in the Eleusinian Mysteries have, nevertheless, been uncovered since that time, in both Grecian and Roman venues.

Perhaps related to the Eleusinian Mysteries, the golden sash also appeared as an accoutrement of Venus in a number of works of the period, as in the examples illustrated in Fig. 10 ('Birth of Venus (detail)' by Sandro Botticelli (1486, Uffizi, Florence); 'Apollo and the Nine Muses on Parnassus (detail)' by Mantegna (1497, Louvre, Paris); 'Venus' by Lorenzo di Credi (1487, Uffizi, Florence); 'Psyche Brings a Vessel up to Venus' by Raphael

(1517, Farnesina, Rome)). In the case of the Botticelli, the actual sash is not depicted literally but suggested by the extended swath of golden-yellow hair. This windblown swath of hair seems to be derived from the golden drape of the initiation ceremonies of the Eleusinian



Figure 11. 'Portrait of Ginevra di Benci' by Leonardo da Vinci (~1474, National), obverse and reverse.

Mysteries (Browden, 2010), although no specific source for Botticelli's connection to this tradition has been identified.

## 6. Leonardo's fascination with the pre-Christian roots of the Humanist tradition

Indeed, one of the very first indications in painting of an awareness of the pre-Christian roots of the Humanist tradition is from Leonardo himself, about a decade before the generally accepted dating of Botticelli's works. This is the presumed wedding portrait of Ginevra di Benci (1474, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC), the sister of his friend Giovanni di Benci (Fig. 11). The juniper bush that forms a kind of headdress in the background behind the sitter is usually treated as a reference of Ginevra's name on the basis of the Italian word for juniper, *ginepro*. The reverse of the panel is decorated with a further sprig of juniper encircled by a wreath of laurel and palm and is memorialised by the phrase "VIRTUTEM FORMA DECORAT" ("BEAUTY ADORNS VIRTUE"). This motto is taken to symbolise Ginevra's intellectual and moral virtue aligned with her physical beauty, based on the classical meanings associated with these plants. This classical awareness may perhaps be related to an association with the Pollaiuolo brothers, who began painting classical themes such as the 'Labours of Hercules' and 'Apollo and Daphne' around the mid-1470s, and indeed whose family name was also Benci, so they were likely related to Ginevra and Giovanni. Their studio was on the same street as Verrocchio's and there are indications that they operated in close association with each other.

The laurel, of course, was long associated with the virtue or victory in classical culture, extending from the Greek gods, the laurel wreath of Apollo, to the wreath of the Roman emperors, while the palm had a range of both classical and Christian symbolism, including peace, inspiration, fertility and victory. The pairing of these plants may well have been intended to express the unity of the Christian and classical traditions that is so characteristic of the Renaissance as a whole, and of the Benci family and of Ginevra's likely husband, Bernardo Bembo, in particular (Botana, 2012). However, it should be realised that this interwoven relationship between the classical and Christian mythology, which is usually attributed to Cosimo de Medici (the Elder), can be traced back to Petrarch through the mediation of Poggio Bracciolini, who worked with Cosimo to put together a public classical library in Florence, and of his daughter in law, Lucrezia Tornabuoni, who spoke both Latin and Greek, and wrote poetry in praise of the mythology of Ovid in the mid-15th century of Leonardo's youth. Although this appreciation of the classical ethos had been ongoing in literary circles for a century or more, it seems that Leonardo's 'Ginevra di Benci' may have been the first Renaissance painting to embody this focus of interest, since all previous Mediaeval paintings derive from biblical themes. Indeed, as described, Leonardo's own library included several books on classical mythology such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which included the myth of Persephone (Vecce, 2017). However, one of Leonardo's few completed mythological works is 'Leda and the Swan', and then known only through copies by his pupils. His interest in that particular myth thus inspired a large number of imitators.

In this connection, Leonardo exhibited an interest in other mythological figures through his drawings, such as a finished drawing of Neptune driving his steeds through the waves and drawings of a variety of other mythical beasts, from unicorns to dragons. Indeed, the dragon is even associated with Persephone in the recounting of the myth by Nonnus Dionysica (5th century BC), one of the longest pieces of Greek literature to come down to us: "Zeus put on a deceiving shape of many coils, as a gentle drakon twining around her in lovely curves, and ravished the maidenhood of unwedded Persephone ... Ah, maiden Persephone! You could not find how to escape your mating! No, a drakon was your mate, when Zeus changed his face and came, rolling in many a loving coil through the dark to the corner of the maiden's chamber, and shaking his hairy jowls: he lulled to sleep as he crept the eyes of those creatures of his own shape who guarded the door. He licked the girl's form gently with wooing lips. By this marriage with the heavenly drakon, the womb of Persephone swelled with living fruit, and she bore Zagreus the horned baby, who by himself climbed upon the heavenly throne of Zeus and brandished lightning in his little hand, and newly born, lifted and carried thunderbolts in his tender fingers."

Nonnus had considerable influence during the Renaissance, when the first translations into Italian were published by Poliziano, one of the humanist circle fostered by Lorenzo de Medici (Tissoni, 2016). Leonardo evidently knew Poliziano and crossed paths with him on his return to Florence in 1508, where he staged the mythological story, the 'Fabula di Orfeo (Fable of Orpheus)' by Poliziano, written

many years earlier at the beginning of 1480 for the Duke of Mantua. A connection between Leonardo and Poliziano during this earlier period is that Leonardo's assistant, Atalante Migliorroti (who subsequently joined Leonardo when he moved to Milan took up the position of Master of Ceremonies for Duke Ludovico Sforza) was recruited by the Gonzagas for the part of Orpheus in the Mantua production of the play. Some of Leonardo's drawings for that project can be found in the Codex Arundel (Pedretti, 1964).



Figure 12. 'Narcissus admiring himself in a mirror' by Leonardo's pupil, Boltraffio (~1500), drawings of a maiden with a mirror and an embodied reflection from earlier in his career, reminiscent of the Nonnus quote and of mirror scenes inscribed on the backs of Etruscan mirrors, as in the rightmost image.

A relatively unexplored aspect of the Persephone myth is her connection with Narcissus and his obsession with his own image in a mirror. According to Nonnus, Persephone was similarly beguiled: '... the gaze of love-maddened Zeus was enslaved by the lovely breast of the goddess [Persephone]. Once she was amusing herself with a resplendent bronze plate, which reflected her face like a judge of beauty; and she confirmed the image of her shape by this free voiceless herald, testing the unreal form in the shadow of the mirror, and smiling at the mimic likeness. Thus Persephone gazed in the self-graved portrait of her face, and beheld the self-impressed aspect of a false Persephoneia.' (Rouse, 1940).

Leonardo is likewise associated with various images of mirrors and their mythological power, as illustrated in Fig. 12. One is of Narcissus obsessed with his image in a mirror by his close Milanese pupil Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, which may have been a copy after such a work by Leonardo himself, since other versions exist by other pupils. The other two images are Leonardo's drawings of a maiden with a mirror, on the other side of which is an angel in one case and a distressed maiden waving flowers in the other case, both of which are reminiscent of the 'false Persephoneia' evoked by the mirror in Nonnus' tale (although conventionally given other explanations in the literature). The fourth image in Fig. 12 is a mythical scene of the goddess Thetis being interrupted in her toilet by the god Pele (not shown), inscribed on the back of one of the ubiquitous Etruscan mirrors found all over Italy (this one from near Orvieto, a region mapped by Leonardo da Vinci in 1503; image from Bonfante, 2015).

Note that all three mirrors in the examples in Fig. 12 are oval with a thick rim, themselves reminiscent of the crystal amulet that Leonardo favours as a central brooch for his golden sash Madonnas, such as the 'Madonna of the Carnation', the 'Benois Madonna', and the 'Madonna of the Rocks' (see Fig. 8A). Thus, this cluster of mythological explorations from Leonardo's second Florentine period tie back to the apparently purely Christian depictions of his earlier period in Florence. And the association with Poliziano suggests that he may have had significant exposure to the classical mythology of the Humanist circle dating back to the beginning of his career.

There are further classical resonances in the 'Virgin of the Rocks' (Fig. 8A). such as a resonance of the Hermes character in the almost floating stance of figure of Jesus, with the hermetic 'as above, so below' pose of his two arms that is found in the Hermes/Mercury figure in both Botticelli's 'Primavera' (~1486, Uffizi, Florence) and the later sculpture of Mercury by Giovanni Bologna (~1580, Bargello, Florence). Although both works postdate Leonardo's painting, they support a Renaissance awareness of this conceptualization of the messenger of the gods, and his role in rescuing Persephone from the clutches of Hades, resulting in the mythological explanation of the day/night cycle.

## 7. Leonardo's identification with John the Baptist

The other aspect of the 'Virgin of the Rocks' composition relevant to these mythological connections is that, in deviating from the original commission, the key character that Leonardo chose to include was John the Baptist, the figure associated with the pre-Christian roots of the Biblical prophecies. Not only is he included on an equitable basis with Jesus, John is placed in a higher position in the composition under the direct protection of the Virgin, while Jesus almost seems to be the subject against which she is protecting him with her outstretched hand. This extraordinary role reversal of the two child-figures seems explicable only under the assumption that Leonardo had a particular regard for the wilderness lifestyle of John the Baptist, which would have reflected the rugged hill-country around Vinci where he grew up until age 14 or so. Although the general character of that countryside is rolling hills, it contains numerous rocky ravines that come close to the spirit of the batholithic grotto surrounding the Virgin, as captured in some of Leonardo's own drawings of such columnar outcroppings. As Jens Thiis describes it: "In all probability Leonardo spent the early years of his childhood on his grandfather's estate at the foot of Monte Albano. Here, leading a free, open-air life in field and on mountain, among vine-growing peasants, we may picture Leonardo growing up. Here the boy developed the suppleness and strength of body that Vasari so highly commends in the youth; here he must have learnt to manage a horse, he who became one of the finest horsemen in Florence; here he grew handsome and healthy, and his mind must have fallen early into the happy, well-balanced condition of which his whole work speaks.

"In these childhood's years in the mountain district, his acquaintance with nature also had its origin. Endowed with his mother's healthy peasant sense, and with the inherited intelligence of his father's family, as an only child he probably wandered about by himself and looked independently at all that surrounded him. He chose experience as his teacher. The plant and animal life on his grandfather's estate, the mountain scenery on Monte Albano, the peasants' horses and the wild birds of the forest, everything [would have] attracted his attention."

(Thiis, 1913).

## 8. Relationship to Etruscan culture

Leonardo shared the interest of his era in the historical remains of the ancient Etruscan civilization that surrounded them, as exemplified by his drawing inspired by the discovery of the Etruscan tomb in Castellino de Chianti in 1507. Indeed, a circle of Florence's leading citizens with whom Leonardo seems to have been in direct contact, including Cardinal Francesco Soderini, Marcello Virgilio Adriani, Luigi Guicciardini, and Giovanni Cavalcanti, penned letters at the time describing the wonder inspired by the tomb's architecture, grave goods and inscriptions (Hillard, 2018). Its contents were described by Ser Marcello Adriani, Secretary of Florence, in a letter to Cardinal Soderini, as including clay urns topped with peaked lids, images of youths engaged in sport and embracing, and the effigy of a woman holding a golden bowl, decorated with gold leaf (see Fig. 13), establishing that iconological information from the Etruscan era had been unearthed early in the 16th century and would have been available for Leonardo's purview when he made his purported trip to see the Castellino tomb. Nevertheless, little is known of what Etruscan relics were available Leonardo's Florence, although we can be sure that they would have been of great interest to the Florentine Humanists, and many would have likely found their way to the Medici sculpture garden and been available for Leonardo's purview (assuming the validity of the reports of the Anonimo Gaddiano of his involvement with this sculpture garden in his early years in Florence).

Two examples of Etruscan works with striking resonances with Leonardo's works are illustrated in Fig. 14. The left image is the sarcophagus of Seianti Hanunia Tlesnasa (~150 BC, British Museum, London), found in a cellar in Chiusi, Tuscany, part way between Florence and Rome, in the nineteenth century. This lifelike depiction of the deceased lady has two unusual features for a funerary monument. One is that she is viewing herself in a mirror. Although hand-mirrors similar to those in Leonardo's drawings of Fig. 12 were common in the Etruscan culture, they are quite unusual in the representation of the dead. The other is that, in common with many such Etruscan funerary monuments, her dress includes a sash across the waist (in addition to a golden cincture under the breast). This feature of clothing was virtually unknown in Roman day wear, which consisted of a short or long tunic, palla,

stola, or toga, sometimes cinched with a belt, but not with a sash around the waist. It seems possible that Leonardo had drawn the inspiration for his novel depictions of the Madonna from Etruscan funerary images such as this that came to light in his time. The specific reclining pose is found in a drawing of 'Venus and Cupid' (1470s, Uffizi, Florence) attributed to Leonardo's master, Verrocchio, but often considered to have been a collaboration with the young Leonardo (lower left, Fig. 14). Indeed, there is a striking resonance, not only with the damsel's pose, but of the impish figure with the wand in this drawing and the impish Etruscan figures in the Adriani sketch in Fig. 13.

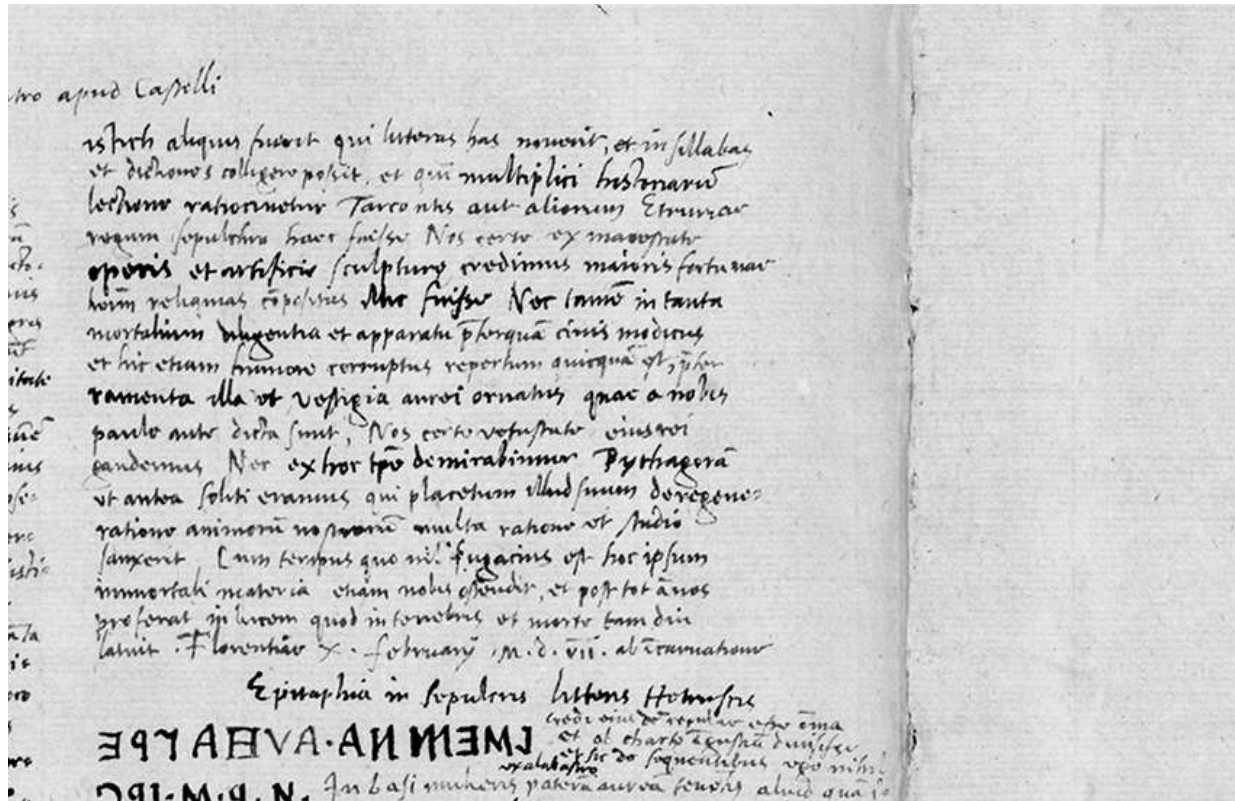


Figure 13. Contemporary copy of sketches of the contents of the Etruscan tomb of Castellino in Chianti by Ser Marcello Adriani (detail from Hillard, 2018, Fig. 5). Note the typically Etruscan poses of female terracotta effigies on the funerary urns (which would have been multicoloured), the horse and the impish figures with wands.

The silver panel at upper right in Fig. 14 shows two horsemen rearing up over a fallen soldier in an Etruscan artwork from Castel San Marino, near Perugia (dated to 540–520 BC, British Museum, London), which is presumed to depict a battle between the Etruscans and the Romans, by whom they were eventually conquered. This configuration is highly reminiscent of the configuration used by Leonardo in his design for the battle of Anghiari for the 1504 commission for the Hall of the Five Hundred in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, as also illustrated by the drawing of a 'Horse and Rider Rearing over a Combatant' (lower right, Fig. 14) by Leonardo da Vinci (1480s, Royal Collection, Windsor). His unfinished design for the battle scene has the same concept of a horse rearing over a fallen man with a round shield (which, incidentally, seems a good candidate for a portrait of himself as a young man). Moreover, the style of this silver panel is quite reminiscent of Verrocchio's silver panel of 'The Beheading of John the Baptist', which recent scholarship has identified as including one figure attributable to Leonardo's hand (Landi, 2009), offering circumstantial support to the idea that such Etruscan works may have been available to 15th century artists as source of inspiration. Thus, these iconographic resonances provide further evidence for Leonardo's role in bringing the classical influences that were prevalent in literature and poetry into the pictorial representations of the era.



Figure 14. Upper left: sarcophagus of Seianti Hanunia Tlesnasa. Upper right: Silver panel with repoussé reliefs of two mounted horsemen rearing over a fallen soldier, overlaid with electrum foil. Lower left: 'Venus and Cupid' by Verrocchio/Leonardo. Lower right: 'Horse and Rider rearing over a Combatant' by Leonardo da Vinci (a theme he also used in his lost 'Battle of Anghiari').

## 9. Conclusion

The identification of the mythical roots of the yellow sash motif that Leonardo da Vinci introduced into the Christian iconography in his earliest works suggests a familiarity with classical themes that are more commonly associated with his later years. This early familiarity should not be regarded as surprising because Botticelli, Leonardo's Florentine compatriot, is legendary for his iconic depictions of mythological subjects in the same period. Indeed, Kline (2011) has recently been suggested that one of Botticelli's most famous (though still mysterious) classical works, the 'Primavera', is itself an allegory of Persephone, paralleling Leonardo's use of this theme. Botticelli's mythical works are representative of the milieu that Leonardo would have encountered on his arrival in Florence, that would be likely to resonate with the chthonic roots of the countryside in which he grew up, with its deep Etruscan history. Indeed, the ancient baths of Montecatini Terme, with its Etruscan walls, were a visible only half a day's journey away from where he grew up in Vinci, and were the centre of Medici marsh drainage works that may have been the origin of his later efforts in waterworks and drainage schemes.

The larger implications of the Etruscan associations of Leonardo's work expand on Hillard's (2018) conclusion that there was a much greater interest and appreciation of the Etruscan roots of the Florentine Renaissance culture than is generally appreciated (with the first discovery of Etruscan artworks generally dated as late as the mid-16th century). The identification of a circle of Humanists exploring the indigenous past of Florence, and of Italy in general, opens a new view of the role of the local Etruscan prehistory on the thinking of the Renaissance. It is particularly noteworthy that the Etruscan culture was deeply imbued with the Greek myths that formed the bedrock of the self-concept of the Roman culture. Although they were reaching out to Greece for the artisans depicting their



mythical roots, they could also find it in their indigenous culture that was being progressively unearthed around them. This line of thought further raises the issue of how the Etruscans came to adopt the Greek myths into their own culture, and how this connection might relate to the historical accounts of the Aeneid and the Odyssey following the fall of Troy.

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