An Etruscan wine jug (probably 6th century BC)

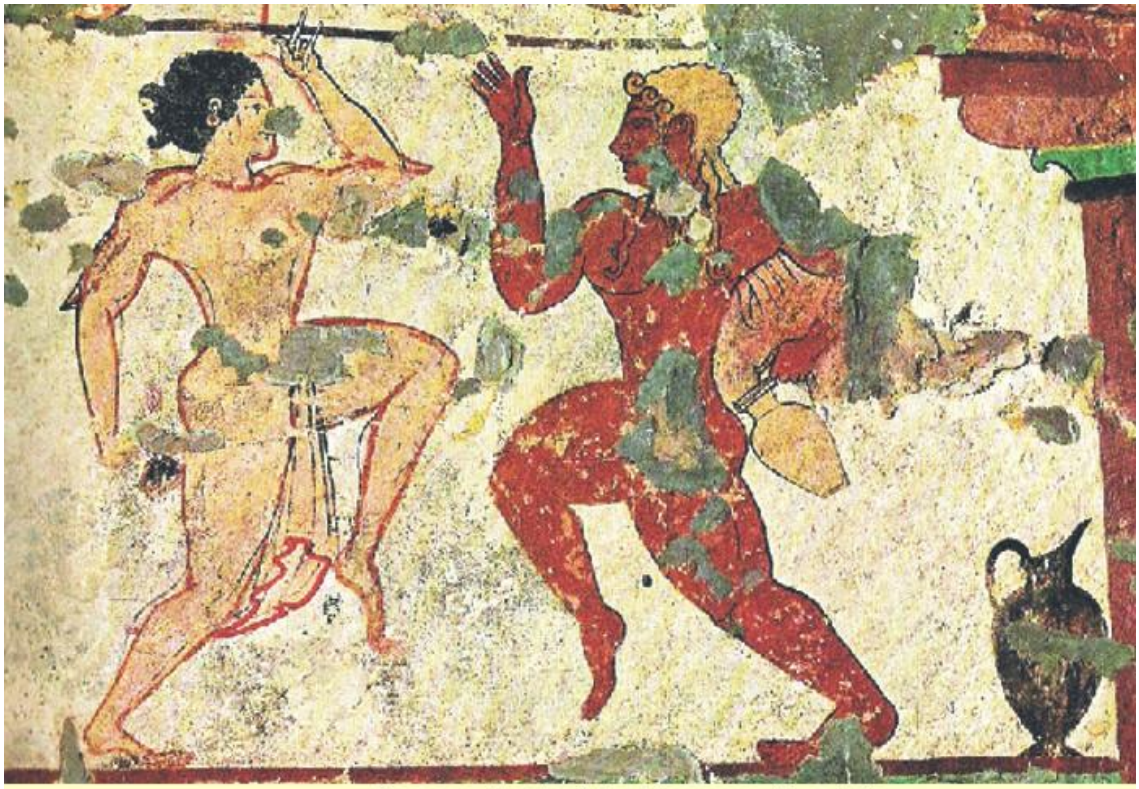
This black jug, 20 cm tall, was made by the Etruscans around the 6th century BC. It is referred to as a oinochoe, which means a wine jug. The Etruscans lived in an area of Italy roughly equivalent to modern Tuscany. They were very keen on their wine and actually introduced wine-making into France, so we have a lot to thank them for.

You may have heard references to Etruscan vases, which usually mean large painted vases made in imitation of ancient Greek vases. However, the normal pottery of the Etruscans was black and is nowadays usually referred to as 'bucchero'. There seems to be some uncertainty about where this word came from – one theory is that it comes from a Portuguese word meaning 'smelly clay'. I can't detect any smell from this jug!

You can see a similar black jug in the bottom right of the painting below, found in an Etruscan tomb dating to 520 BC. Interestingly the person dancing on the right seems to be holding a jug as he dances, but judging from the colour of the jug in the painting that jug is metal, which would make sense if you are going to dance with it.

The black coloration of the Etruscan pottery comes from smoke firing. At the high temperatures of the firing the carbon particles in the smoke can diffuse into the pores of the clay. At lower temperatures, the mobility of the carbon in the clay pores is greatly reduced, so at room temperature it is trapped in the clay. It is also possible that iron in the clay, reduced during the firing, contributes to the black colouration. Researchers attempting to reproduce the black surface have suggested that the pots were fired in saggars filled with an organic material such as sawdust, but saggars are certainly not essential for black smoke-fired surfaces - I have seen modern smoke-fired pottery which was fired in a kiln without saggars and where an intense black colour was achieved by closing off the air at the peak of the firing, filling the kiln with smoke and then leaving it sealed for an extended period.

You need to be a bit wary when examining the surface of a black Etruscan pot because it is believed that many Etruscan pots were 'improved' in the 18th and 19th centuries by painting them with a blackening compound of some sort. In fact most of the black Etruscan pots now held by the British Museum have been treated in this way. My jug looks as if it has had some sort of black coating which has worn away in places, revealing a cloudy black surface typical of smoke firing. Inside the rim there is a blacker band one or two centimetres deep, which appears to mark the limit of this painted coating.



Dancers, Tomb of the Lionesses, Tarquinia

The jug was thrown on a wheel and turned. It seems likely that the neck was thrown separately and then attached to the body – I can feel a slight thickening at the join inside the pot. Before firing, Etruscan bucchero was burnished all over (except for the foot) with a small tool. Researchers have found that earlier vessels were burnished with short vertical freehand strokes, but that after between 625 and 600 BC some potters burnished their pots on the wheel, creating long horizontal burnishing marks. It can be difficult to see the burnishing marks if the pot has had a black coating – on my pot it is clear that the neck has been burnished vertically, but it looks as if the body has horizontal burnishing marks, which would make it later than this date.

A close look at this jug reveals that it has been carefully assembled from pieces. Presumably it was discovered broken, either in a tomb or buried, and stuck together. It has travelled far – it is recorded that it was owned by a Greek collector early in the 20th century and then went with his family to Australia. I bought it at an auction in London.

You may wonder how well a smoke-fired jug with no glaze would hold wine without it seeping out through the porous clay body. I thought about testing this with my jug but decided as it had been reassembled from pieces I didn't want to risk the joints weakening if they get wet. However, I think it is right to expect that the porosity of the clay will have been reduced by the burnishing and the

intensive smoke firing. The smoke firing would have clogged the pores of the clay with carbon particles and the burnishing would close the larger pores near the surface and align the platelets of clay parallel to the surface.

Kevin Akhurst