

# Ancestors at the gate

Form, function and symbolism of the *imagines maiorum*  
A comparative analysis of Etruscan and Roman funerary art

*Sanguinis autem coniunctio et benevolentia devincit homines et caritate; magnum est enim aedem habere momumenta maiorum, eisdem uti sacris, sepulcra habere communia.*

The bonds of common blood hold men fast through good will and affection; for it means much to share in common the same family traditions, the same forms of domestic worship, and the same ancestral tombs.  
M. Tullius Cicero. *De Officiis*, 1.54–55

## Abstract

Scholars have interpreted the *imagines maiorum* (face-like representations of Roman familial ancestors), such as the ones represented in the famous Barberini statue, as wax masks that were worn by actors who impersonated the dead during funeral processions. Since members of the Roman aristocracy displayed the *imagines* of their ancestors who had held an important office, most scholars have concluded that the usage of the *imagines* was merely social and political and therefore devoid of any ritual or symbolic value. My paper, through close analysis of Roman literary and material evidence, argues that the *imagines maiorum* were not masks but complete portable wax heads; furthermore, that the *imagines* displayed in the Roman *atrium*, in addition to serving as status markers, played an important role in domestic rituals. There is convincing evidence that the *imagines* were objects of specific, periodic ritual acts (burning of incense, application of colours and laurel). Finally, I argue that the *imagines maiorum*, paraded at the head of a funeral procession, had a significance beyond aristocratic pomp: from the ritual opening of shrines to the arrival at the tomb, the *imagines maiorum* represented the ancestors who, together with the living, accompanied the deceased in his journey to the afterlife—a scene depicted in several Etruscan tombs.

*Keywords:* *imagines maiorum*, portraits, wax mask, ancestors, Roman ritual, Etruscan tomb

## Introduction

### IMAGINES MAIORUM: MASKS OR VOTIVE PORTRAITS?

Pliny the Elder, in his *Naturalis historia* (35.2), writes about the old Roman custom—no longer in use at his time—of displaying representations of familial ancestors, the *imagines*

*maiorum* in the vestibule (*atrium*) of the Roman house (*domus*). Pliny recognizes these portraits as distinctive elements of Roman tradition and compares them to the expensive and sophisticated images customarily used by the Greeks:

In the days of our ancestors, it was these that were to be seen in their halls, and not statues made by foreign artists, or works in bronze or marble: portraits [*imagines*] modelled in wax were arranged, each in its separate niche, to be always in readiness to accompany the funeral processions of the family.<sup>1</sup>

The historical and archaeological sources of the Republic and early Empire document the relevance of the representation and commemoration of the ancestors in everyday life.<sup>2</sup> Ancient Romans honoured the accomplishments of their forefathers both in political orations and private letters. Among the several representations of the ancestors, the *imagines*

<sup>1</sup> Plin. *HN* 35.2: *aliter apud maiores in atriis haec erant, quae spectarentur; non signa externorum artificum nec aera aut marmora: expressi cera vultus singulis disponebantur armariis, ut essent imagines, quae comitarentur gentilicia funera.*

<sup>2</sup> Private and public buildings (houses, tombs, *fora*, *basilicae*) were crowded with statues and busts of ancestors. The *atria* of Roman aristocratic families were full of *imagines*, *imagines clipeatae* (shield portraits) and *stemma* (family trees). The memories of the ancestors are often mentioned in political orations, forensic speeches, senatorial laws, and private letters.

*maiorum* were strongly linked to Roman identity. As exemplified by the statue of the Togatus Barberini, they constituted the visual representation of the continuity between past and present generations, the most tangible symbol of the *mos maiorum*, the hallowed “ancestral custom” (Fig. 1). The usage of *imagines*, which is first documented at the end of the 3rd century BC, reached its peak between the 2nd and the 1st century BC, and declined in the 1st century AD, when Pliny laments that the *imagines maiorum* were no longer popular.<sup>3</sup>

In assessing the importance of the *imagines*, modern scholarship has hitherto concentrated on their public, social, and political aspects.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have interpreted them as especially aimed at the establishment and prominent display of a family’s status thereby defining their function as overtly political, since the boasting of ancestors who had served in illustrious offices reinforced the legitimacy of political aspirations.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, this paper argues that Roman ancestral *imagines*, in addition to serving as status markers, played an important role in domestic rituals, which probably harkened back to archaic Etruscan funerary traditions that predated, influenced, and overlapped with Roman archaic religion. These practices included rites of passage, protective and apotropaic rituals, and elaborate funerary commemorations. The civilization of the Etruscans exerted a strong influence on Rome’s culture, especially at the end of the monarchy.<sup>6</sup> Since, between the Republic and the Principate, Rome began to formalize a national identity that emphasized the centrality of family and the uniqueness of its moral traditions, it could not explicitly acknowledge

<sup>3</sup> The earliest sources include Pl. *Am.* 458 and Polyb. 6.53–54. Most of the historical sources that make references to the *imagines maiorum* are in the 2nd century BC and Livy mentions the high demand for wax in the 2nd century BC (Livy, 40.34.12; 42.7.2). The *imagines* vanished rapidly from aristocratic *atria* and funerals under the Julio-Claudian emperors, see: Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1932, 61; Drerup 1980, 105; Flower 1996, 223.

<sup>4</sup> Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1932, 41; Dumézil 1977, 321; Gruen 1992, 154; Flower 1996, 2, 90.

<sup>5</sup> As an example of association of the *imagines maiorum* with one’s aristocratic credential, see Sall. *Iug.* 85.29–30: Marius’s speech: “I am not able to inspire confidence by parading the *imagines* or triumphs or consulships of my ancestors, but, as need arises, I can show spears and standards presented for valour, medals, other military decorations, and besides the scars on the front of my body. There are my *imagines*, these my nobility, not inherited as in their case, but which I myself strove to acquire through many labours and dangers.”

<sup>6</sup> According to the tradition, the last three Roman kings, Tarquinius Priscus, Servius Tullius, and Tarquinius Superbus, were of Etruscan descent. It is especially at the end of the monarchic period that Etruscan and Roman culture had a close relationship. At the end of the 6th century Etruscan workshops built the Temple dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. Famously Rome acquired from the Etruscan neighbours important symbols of political power such as the curule ivory chair, the lictors, or royal attendants, and the art of haruspicy; Livy, I.3–5. See Bandinelli-Torelli 2008; Bianchi Bandinelli 1969, 1982; Torelli 1985.



Fig. 1. Barberini statue, early Augustan age, Montemartini Museum, Rome. Published with permission of the Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali, Musei Capitolini, Centrale Montemartini, Roma.

the persistence of Etruscan or Italic elements in its beliefs and practices. However, I believe that if we look beyond public ceremonies and official propaganda, ancient traditions that were probably shared by most people of the Italian peninsula survived in the private sphere of Roman life. Thus, my paper analyses these instances of continuity between Roman and Etruscan domestic practices, insofar as they are evident from material culture. In doing so, my research attempts to shed new light on some controversial aspects concerning the appearance and the function of the *imagines maiorum* in the aristocratic domestic and funeral contexts.

## Imagines' appearance

Surprisingly, in my opinion there still seems to be consistent scholarly confusion about both the definition of the term *imagines* and the description of what kind of objects they were. Therefore the disambiguation of the meanings of the *imagines maiorum* in different contexts represents a preliminary element of this essay. Scholars have customarily translated *imagines maiorum* as “ancestor masks” worn by actors impersonating ancestors.<sup>7</sup> The ancient sources frequently refer to *imagines maiorum* (almost 150 times) as a familiar presence in the aristocratic houses of Republican Rome. These representations must have been such an ordinary sight that ancient authors never described them and their usage in great detail. Unfortunately, the extant pieces of archaeological evidence that can be correlated with the *imagines maiorum* mentioned in the historical sources are few and have been interpreted with a fair amount of controversy, primarily because they do not show that the *imagines maiorum* were actually masks.<sup>8</sup> Although Latin authors never used the Latin term for masks, *personae*, the translation of *imagines maiorum* as “masks” has become customary. Among ancient authors, only Polybius and Pliny devote some words to describe these *imagines*. For Polybius they represented human faces (εἰκῶν ἐστὶ πρόσωπον), whereas Pliny mentions that these portraits were made of wax (*expressi cera vultus*).<sup>9</sup> Other authors simply referred to them using terms such as *imago* (image), *vultus* (face), *cera* (wax), *effigies* (effigy), πρόσωπον (face), εἰκῶν (image), without providing any specific physical description of the *imagines*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1932, 22; Dumézil 1977, 320; Drerup 1980, 84–85; Price 1987, 64–65; Gruen 1992, 154; Flower 1996, 59.

<sup>8</sup> Barberini *Togatus*; shrines in Pompeii (in the *exedra* 25 in House of Menander, and in the *atrium* of the House of Balbus); marble grave reliefs in the National Museum of Copenhagen; wax face from a tomb in Cuma; Vienna Cameo.

<sup>9</sup> Polyb. 6.53.5; Plin. *HN* 35.2.

<sup>10</sup> *Imago/imagines*: Cic. *Cael.* 33–34; Cic. *Clu.* 72; Cic. *Agr.* 2.1; Cic. *Mil.* 86; Cic. *Mur.* 88; Cic. *Sul.* 88; Porph.; Sall. *Iug.* 4.5 and 85.10;

What is instead certain is that ancient sources clearly set the *imagines maiorum* apart from other portraits of ancestors, such as busts, statues, and *hermai*. They belonged to a distinct category of objects. Pliny lists the *imagines* as the most prominent among all the representation of ancestors displayed in the *atrium* such as paintings (*imagines pictae*), family trees (*stemmata*), and shield portraits (*imagines clipeatae*), busts, and statues.<sup>11</sup> Further evidence is the *senatus consultum* of AD 20, which, in declaring the *damnatio memoriae* of the senator Gnaeus Piso, ordered his family, the Calpurniae, to destroy all portraits of him and mentioned Piso's *imago* as a distinct item in a list that also included his statues and busts.<sup>12</sup>

There are very few extant physical remains that have been recognized as *imagines maiorum* or as the shrines in which they were contained. The rest of the material evidence consists of representations of *imagines maiorum* in reliefs and statues.

The two masonry shrines with niches found in Pompeii (respectively in the House of Menander and the House of Balbus) do not contribute to a definitive understanding of the original physical appearance of the *imagines maiorum*.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately the heads obtained from the plaster casts made from the cavities left by the original objects reveal primitive manufacture and undistinguishable features (*Fig. 2*).<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately, the famous Barberini statue of the early Augustan age provides a clearer idea about the possible appearance of the *imagines maiorum* (*Fig. 1*). It shows a man in a toga solemnly holding in his hands the representations of two human heads. The strong similarities among the three faces suggest that the men might have been related. Therefore, scholars have interpreted the statue as the portrait of a nobleman (*patricius*) with the *imagines* of his ancestors, probably the father and the paternal grandfather.<sup>15</sup> Because of the indi-

Sen. *Con.* 2.3.6, and 7.6.10; Suet. *Ves.* 1.1; Tac. *Ann.* 3.5 and 6.1.2; Livy, 1.34.6; 1.47.4; 38.56.12–13. *Vultus*: Juv. 8.19; Plin. *HN* 35.6; Mart. 7.44. *Cera*: Ov. *Am.* 1.8.65–66; Ov. *Fast.* 1.589–592; Sall. *Jug.* 4.5–6. *Effigies*: SHA *Alex. Sev.* 29.2; V. Max. 5.8.3; Tac. *Ann.* 3.5. πρόσωπον (face), εἰκῶν (image): Polyb. 6.53.6; Diod. 3.25.2; Dio Cass. 56.46.4–5.

<sup>11</sup> Plin. *HN* 35.4–14.

<sup>12</sup> *Senatus consultum de Cn. Pisone patre* (10 December, AD 20, Spain).

<sup>13</sup> There are different interpretations regarding the shrine in House of Menander, *exedra* 25. Some scholars assert that it is an ancestor shrine for the *imagines maiorum*: Maiuri 1933, 98–106; Boyce 1937, 28; Orr 1972, 117; Giacobello 2008, 61, 71, 256; Drerup 1980, 98; Clarke 1991, 192. Other scholars do not accept this interpretation: Flower 1996, 42. The House of Menander at the time of the destruction belonged to the important Roman *gens* of Poppaea, the family of Nero's wife, see Flower 1996, 42; Giacobello 2008, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Drerup thinks that the heads in the shrine in the House of Menander were made in wood and wax, so that with the high temperature of the volcanic eruption the wax was compressed and melted with the wood part. This may explain why the plaster casts have this primitive appearance, and why they are under life size. Drerup 1980, 99.

<sup>15</sup> Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1932, 45–46; Bianchi Bandinelli 1969, 80–81; Gruen 1992, 155; Flower 1996, 5–6.





Fig. 2. Ancestral shrine with ancestors' *imagines* in exedra 25, House of Menander, Pompeii. Published with permission of the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo, Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Pompei, Ercolano e Stabia.

visualized appearance of the two portraits, some scholars hypothesized that the *imagines* were moulded using a direct cast taken of the face of the deceased.<sup>16</sup> Erich Gruen has instead suggested that the two heads of the Barberini statue, doubtlessly ancestral *imagines*, were created when the subjects were still alive, since both of them feature open eyes and no signs of *rigor mortis*.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the fact that the *togatus* is holding the head on the left with evident ease, has allowed scholars to infer that

<sup>16</sup> Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1932, 48–49; Bianchi Bandinelli 1965, 26–27; Bianchi Bandinelli 1969, 80; Drerup 1980 85–86, 99; Swift 1923, 293. Latin authors also emphasize the fact that the *imagines*' features were realistic representations of the ancestors' face: Plin. *Ep.* 2.7.7; Cic. *De Rep.* 6.10.

<sup>17</sup> Gruen 1992, 152–156; also Flower 1996, 102.

the head must have been moulded in light material, such as wax (*cera*), a material to which the sources continuously make reference (e.g. *cera vultus*, εἰκῶν κηρίνη, “waxen face”).<sup>18</sup> Wax is an extremely perishable material, and as a result wax heads do not survive. The only extant example was discovered in 1852 in a tomb in Cuma and dated to the 2nd century AD (Fig. 3). This piece might help us to better understand the question of the interpretation of the Barberini heads as *imagines maiorum*.<sup>19</sup> The Cuma find represents an extremely realistic wax head, which accurately portrays a male face featuring open glass-paste eyes. This unique piece is made of two layers of wax.<sup>20</sup> It reproduces a life-size whole head, is hollow (but cannot be worn as a mask) and preserves traces of colours on its surface.<sup>21</sup> For these reasons, the Cuma head might correspond to the two ancestral portraits displayed in the Barberini statue. Clearly enough, these three portraits represent complete heads—none of them is a mask representing only the front of the face.<sup>22</sup>

Historical sources, in describing the *imagines maiorum*, make no explicit reference to the idea that they were masks that an impersonator could wear. They simply recount that the *imagines* were placed in the *atrium*, or paraded in the funerary procession.<sup>23</sup> Latin authors do write that the *imagines*, once decorated and taken out of the houses, occupied a prominent position in patrician funeral, yet never explicitly refer to impersonators wearing them.<sup>24</sup> Scholars, in in-

<sup>18</sup> Plin. *HN* 35.2; Juv. 8.1–20; Mart. 7.44; Ov. *Am.* 1.8.65–66; Ov. *Fast.* 1.589–592; Sall. *Bell. Jug.* 4.5–6. The ease with which Livia, in the Vienna Cameo, seems to hold a reproduction of Augustus's head in her hand might suggest the use of wax.

<sup>19</sup> The wax head was found in 1852 in a closed chamber tomb in the necropolis at Cuma (2nd century AD) by the archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli. Today it is in the Naples National Museum, Room 97. See Fiorelli 1853; Minervini 1853.

<sup>20</sup> For the head of Cuma see: Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1932, 54; Drerup 1980, 94; Gruen 1992, 155.

<sup>21</sup> Drerup 1980, 94–98; Gruen 1992, 154–155; Flower 1996, 6–7.

<sup>22</sup> The representation of the whole head is also seen in the Vienna Cameo (where Livia holds in her hand the head of Augustus), and a marble grave relief in the National Museum of Copenhagen (inv. no. 1187) (Fig. 5).

<sup>23</sup> Latin authors who describe the *imago* or *imagines* in the aristocratic house mention only the position in the *atrium*, using the following verbs: *erat* (“was”), *disponebantur* (“were displayed”), *exornet* (“decorate”), *posita est in atrii* (“was set in the atria”). Plin. *Ep.* 3.3.6; Sen. *Ben.* 3.28.2; Sen. *Ep.* 44.5; Val. Max. 5.8.3; Vitruv. 6.3.6.

<sup>24</sup> Plin. *HN* 35.6: *imagines quae comitantur gentilicia funera* (“the *imagines* which accompany the funeral”); Sen. *Con.* 1.6.3–4: *extulissent imagines* (“the *imagines* that accompany [the funeral of Pompey]”); Hor.

terpreting the *imagines* as masks, have customarily referred to Polybius' famous description of a Roman funeral, carried out around 150 BC.<sup>25</sup> Scholars have perhaps relied too heavily on this passage and made assumptions based on a text that in fact describes events ambiguously. Furthermore, as a foreigner dealing with unfamiliar practices, the Greek Polybius might have misunderstood or overlooked important features of Roman funerals. If we examine the original text closely it is not at all clear that the *imagines* were masks:

They (the Roman family) open these *imagines* (ταύτας δὴ τὰς εἰκόνας) for the public sacrifices and decorate them and whenever a leading member of the family dies they bring (ἄγουσιν) [them] into the funeral, putting [them] around (περιτιθέντες) those who seem to be (δοκοῦσι) the most similar as possible (ὡς ὁμοιοτάτοις) (to the ancestors) according to height and general form.<sup>26</sup>

The passage above does not mention any term meaning “mask” but only a verb indicating that the *imagines* (εἰκόνας) “were put around” (περιτιθέντες), which does not exclude the possibility that the *imagines* were whole heads. Polybius does not use any term meaning “men” or “actors” impersonating the ancestors. Polybius's description is so vague that the only word that could imply impersonators of ancestors is contained in a masculine plural participle (δοκοῦσι) (“those who appear”). The historian refers to the *imagines* only through the use of demonstratives and verbs in the passive form, which suggests that these *imagines* did not walk through the procession by themselves.<sup>27</sup> Polybius writes that the *imagines* were carried in



Fig. 3. Wax head of Cuma, 2nd century AD, Naples National Museum, Room 97. Photo published with permission of the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo, Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli.

a chariot and placed on the chariot-board.<sup>28</sup> The actual meaning of Polybius's account can be clarified in light of a passage in Valerius Maximus, according to which it can be argued that

*Epod.* 8.11–12: *funus atque imagines ducant triumphales tuum* (“Let the triumphal *imagines* lead your funeral”); Porph: *in funere autem nobilissimi cuiusque solebant praeferri imagines maiorum eius* (“in the funeral procession of each most prominent member of the office-holding caste it was the custom for the *imagines* of his ancestors to be displayed”); Livy 38.56.12–13: *imago sua triumphali ornatu e templo Iovis optimi maximi exiret* (“the *imago* leaves from the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus”); Tac. *Ann.* 3.5: *circumfusas lecto Claudiorum Iuliorumque imagines*, (“the *imagines* had surrounded the casket”); Tac. *Ann.* 3.76: *viginti clarissimarum familiarum imagines antelatae sunt*, (“the *imagines* of the illustrious men of the family preceded”); Val. Max. 4.1: *voluerunt imaginem eius triumphali ornatu indutam capitolinis pulvinaribus adplicare*, (“the Roman citizens wanted to place the *imago* [of Scipio], dressed in triumphal dress, at the banquet of the Gods of the Capitoline Temple”).

<sup>25</sup> Polybius, a citizen of Megalopolis, was deported during the 2nd century BC as political hostage to Rome where he became a close friend of the Scipio family.

<sup>26</sup> Translation my own. Polyb. 6.53.6: ταύτας δὴ τὰς εἰκόνας ἐν τε ταῖς δημοτελέσι θυσίαις ἀνοίγοντες κοσμοῦσι φιλοτίμως, ἐπάν τε τῶν οἰκείων μεταλλάξῃ τις ἐπιφανής, ἄγουσιν εἰς τὴν ἐκφορὰν, περιτιθέντες ὡς ὁμοιοτάτοις εἶναι δοκοῦσι κατὰ τε τὸ μέγεθος καὶ τὴν ἄλλην περικοπήν.

<sup>27</sup> Polyb. 6.53.7–9: “[7] They (οὔτοι) assume (προσαναλαμβάνουσιν) their costume in addition, if the person was a consul or praetor, a toga with a

purple border, if a censor, the all-purple toga, but if someone had celebrated a triumph or done something like that, a gold embroidered toga. 8] They (οὔτοι) were carried on wagons (πορεύονται) and the rods and axes and the other customary equipment of those in power accompanies them according to the dignity befitting the rank and station achieved by each man in politics during his lifetime. [9] All of them are seated (καθίζονται πάντες) in order (ἐξῆς) on ivory chariot-boards (ἐπὶ δίφρων ἐλεφαντίνων).” [Translation my own]. Greek text: 6.53.7–9: [7] οὔτοι δὲ προσαναλαμβάνουσιν ἐσθήτας, ἐὰν μὲν ὑπατος ἢ στρατηγὸς ἢ γεγωνῶς, περιπορφύρους, ἐὰν δὲ τιμητῆς, πορφυράς, ἐὰν δὲ καὶ τεθριαμβευκῶς ἢ τι τοιοῦτον κατεργασμένος, διαχύρους.[8] αὐτοὶ μὲν οὖν ἐφ’ ἄρμάτων οὔτοι πορεύονται, ῥάβδοι δὲ καὶ πελέκεις καὶ τᾶλλα τὰ ταῖς ἀρχαῖς εἰωθότα συμπαρακείσθαι προηγείται κατὰ τὴν ἄξιν ἐκάστου τῆς γεγενημένης κατὰ τὸν βίον ἐν τῇ πολιτείᾳ προαγωγῆς ὅταν δ’ ἐπὶ τοῖς ἐμβόλους ἔλθωσι, [9] καθίζονται πάντες ἐξῆς ἐπὶ δίφρων ἐλεφαντίνων. οὐ κάλλιον οὐκ εὐμαρὲς ἰδεῖν θέαμα νέω φιλοδόξω καὶ φιλαγάθω.

<sup>28</sup> After the *imagines* arrive at the forum, they are described as seated “ἐπὶ δίφρων ἐλεφαντίνων” (Polyb. 6.53.9). This phrase is usually translated as “on ivory chairs” but it can also be translated as “on the ivory chariot-boards” a seat inside the chariot, suggesting that perhaps the *imagines* remain placed in the chariot.



the *imagines* were not a mask worn by a person but a whole head.<sup>29</sup> The historian recounts an episode in which Roman citizens asked for the *imago* of Scipio Africanus to be wrapped in a triumphal dress and then placed among the gods in the Capitoline Temple. This passage is comprehensible only if we interpret Scipio's *imago* as a head put on a dummy, since it is difficult to believe that the Romans would have left a human being (a lowly actor) in a hallowed place such as the *cella* of Jupiter's temple on the Capitoline Hill.<sup>30</sup>

In my opinion, the misunderstanding about the nature and usage of the *imagines maiorum* can be traced back to a passage in which Suetonius (70–120 BC) describes Vespasian's funeral and that scholars have used it to complement the lacunae of Polybius's account.<sup>31</sup> In this episode, Suetonius does not focus on main stages of the emperor's funeral procession but on a comic diversion, in which an actor, a certain Favor, mocks the proverbial stinginess of the recently deceased Flavian emperor by wearing a mask that reproduced his features. In this case, it is clear enough that the historian is not describing the solemn phases of the *pompa funebris* and the procession of the *imagines maiorum*. Suetonius, in such an instance, explicitly mentions an actor wearing a *persona*—undoubtedly a mask, whereas in previous passages, he had already used *imagines maiorum* in order refer to the honourable representations of ancestors I interpret as full heads.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Val. Max. 4.1.6: *Voluerunt illi statuas in comituo, in rostris, in curia, in ipsa denique Iovis optimi maximi cella ponere, voluerunt imaginem eius triumphali ornatu indutam Capitolinis pulvinaribus adplicare.* ("They [the Romans] wanted to put statues of him [Scipio Africanus] in the *comitium*, at the *rostra*, in the senate house, and in the very cult room of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. They wanted to place his *imago* dressed in triumphal dress at the banquet of the gods on the Capitoline"); Val. Max. 8.15.1: *Itaque quod hodieque eximium capit adiciam. Imaginem in cella Iovis optimi maximi positam habet, quae, quotienscumque funus aliquod Corneliae gentis celebrandum est, inde petitur, unquam illi instar atrii Capitolium est.* ("Consequently, I shall add what he especially has even today. He [Scipio Africanus] has his *imago* put up in the cult room of Jupiter Optimus Maximus and whenever a funeral is held by the family of the Corneli, it is fetched from there. For him alone, the Capitoline Temple is like his *atrium*"); also App. *Hisp.* 89.

<sup>30</sup> The use of dummies instead of corpses in the funeral procession was not uncommon in ancient Rome. Appianus reports that since the real body of Caesar was not to be seen, a wax effigy of his body was shown and could be turned around by a mechanical device (App. *B Civ.* 2.147).

<sup>31</sup> Suet. *Ves.* 19.2: *Sed et in funere Favor archimimus personam eius ferens imitansque, ut est mos, facta ac dicta vivi, interrogatis palam procuratoribus, quanti funus et pompa constaret, ut audit sestertium centiens, exclamavit, centum sibi sestertia darent ac se vel in Tiberim proicerent.* ("But also in his [Vespasianus's] funeral procession Favor, the mime actor who wore his mask and imitated his deeds and words when he was alive, as is the custom. He publicly asked the procurators how much the funeral and procession cost. When he heard ten million sesterces, he called out that they should give him 100,000 and even throw his body in the Tiber").

<sup>32</sup> Suet. *Ves.* 1.1.

In conclusion, both archaeological and historical sources describe the *imagines maiorum* as life-size representations of the face of ancestors depicted as living men. Although scholars have referred to them as "masks", there is no explicit evidence to support this interpretation. Through close analysis of literary and material evidence, I have demonstrated that the *imagines* were not masks, but complete, portable wax heads. Finally, while it is not yet possible to establish by whom and in what way they were carried and paraded during funeral processions, it is certain that the *imagines maiorum* is that they were light, portable objects made of wax.

## The *imagines maiorum* and their function: new hypotheses

As we have seen, literary sources mention the presence of the *imagines maiorum* in two contexts: the vestibule (*atrium*) of Roman houses and the funerary procession (*pompa funebris*). In this section I examine the function of the *imagines* in these two contexts.

### THE DOMESTIC CONTEXT: THE LOCATION AND ROLE OF THE *IMAGINES*

Pliny describes the ancestor *imagines*, as displayed in separate shrines (*armaria*) in the *atrium*.<sup>33</sup> Other authors such as Seneca, Ovid, Vitruvius, and Valerius Maximus mention that the *imagines* were paraded in the *atrium* of aristocratic houses.<sup>34</sup> Archaeological evidence seems to support these historical accounts. For example, the ancestor shrine of the House of Balbus in Pompeii was found in the *atrium*.<sup>35</sup> A temple-shaped wooden shrine, which some scholars interpret as an ancestor *armarium*, was found in one wing (*ala*) of the *atrium* of the House of the Bicentenary at Herculaneum.<sup>36</sup> John R. Clark and Harriet I. Flower have explained that the presence of ancestor shrines in the colonnaded garden (peristyle) of the House of Menander in Pompeii is connected to the change in architectural fashion of the 1st century AD, when, due to Hellenistic influence, the peristyle replaced the function of the typical Roman *atrium*.<sup>37</sup>

Scholars have hitherto emphasized the social and political function of the *atrium*, in that it represented the place where

<sup>33</sup> Plin. *HN* 35.6 and 8.

<sup>34</sup> Polyb. 6.53.4; Cic. *Phil.* 2.26; Ov. *Fast.* 1.591; Val. Max. 5.8.3; Sen. *Ben.* 3.28.2; *Laus Pisonis* 8; Juv. 8.19–20; Mart. 2.90.5–8; Ov. *Am.* 1.8.65; Vitruv. 6.3.6; Sen. *Ep.* 44.5.

<sup>35</sup> Giacobello 2008, 142.

<sup>36</sup> Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1932, 24; Orr 1972, 128; De Carolis 2007, 138, (Corpus B n. 23); Giacobello 2008, 72.

<sup>37</sup> Clarke 1991, 363–364; Flower 1996, 193.

an aristocratic family would display signs of wealth and status to friends and clients.<sup>38</sup> But, in addition to being the centre of social life, the *atrium* was also a central site of domestic rituals. In fact, it contained the shrines of the ancient house divinities (*lararia*, which contained the *lares* or household gods together with the *genius* of the *pater familias*).<sup>39</sup> In this respect we can investigate if the *imagines* displayed in the *atrium*, in addition to serving as status markers, played an important role in domestic rituals.

The Latin historical sources, for the most part, describe the *imagines* as groups surrounding the *atrium* of the Roman aristocratic houses (*atrium plenum fumosis imaginibus, imagines multas, plenam imaginibus domus*).<sup>40</sup> Anyone entering the *domus* through the vestibule, the *atrium*, would find himself completely surrounded by the *imagines* of ancestors. In fact, if we consider the architecture of the *domus*, we see that the *atrium* can be understood as the passage and the threshold between the private space of household and the external world. And in this function, the symbolism of the *imagines*' presence in the *atrium* can be analysed in light of Etruscan ancestral rituals either as a result of direct derivation or on account of a shared Italic cultural background.<sup>41</sup>

Since the 7th century BC, the Etruscans had displayed representations of family ancestors in the vestibule of their tombs (which they built to resemble their houses).<sup>42</sup> Giovannangelo

Camporeale pointed out these portraits of ancestors displayed in the entrance, acted as guardians of the most vulnerable space—the passage between the outside and the inside.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, we have seen that *imagines maiorum* surrounded the *atrium* of Roman aristocratic houses between the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Principate.

The fact that some authors describe these portraits as blackened by smoke (*fumosas imagines*),<sup>44</sup> probably due to the burning of incense, allows us to consider that the *imagines maiorum* might have been the object of ritual practices. And along these same lines we might conclude that the presence of a small altar in front of the ancestral niche in the Pompeian House of Menander indicates that it was perhaps needed for offerings and libations (Fig. 2).

Furthermore, we know that during some festivals, the *imagines* were decorated upon the commemoration of ancestors during the funeral.<sup>45</sup> Pliny mentions decorated *imagines* (*cerae pictae*) (Nat. 35.2) and Cicero tells that his client Mure-

<sup>38</sup> Scholars like Coarelli (1976, 30, 48) and Flower (1996, 199) have emphasized the importance of the *atrium* as public place to display the status of the family. In the *imagines*' shrines (*armaria*) scholars note the presence of a label (*titulus*) with the ancestor's name and a list of his political offices (*cursus honorum*). Livy (at the beginning of the 1st century AD) mentions the *titula* of the *armaria*: Livy, 8.40 3–5; 22.31.8–11; 30.45.67; also Val. Max. 5.8.3; Hor. *Serm.* 1.6.18.

<sup>39</sup> For the importance of the *atrium* as public centre of the domestic rituals see: Orr 1972, 2–4; Dupont 1989, 99–100; Clarke 1991, 1–2; 7–12; Clarke 2003, 73; Beard 1998; 2008, 298. Bergmann 1994, 225–226; Flower 1996, 200. An example of such domestic rituals can be found in Ovid's *Fasti*. Ovid describes a ritual that takes place inside the house, most probably in the *atrium*, during the feast of the *Lemuria*, where the *pater familias* performs a ritual in order to drive away the shadow of the ancestors from the house (Ov. *Fast.* 5.429) also Plin. *HN* 18.119.

<sup>40</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 2.27.2; Sil. *Pun.* 4.493–497; Sen. *Ep.* 44.5.

<sup>41</sup> There is evidence that the Etruscans produced *imagines maiorum* as well. The Tarquinian Nenfro stela (dated to the end of the 4th century BC), presents the relief of a female head framed by a small temple with a triangular pediment. Specific features attest the high status of the woman: she wears two necklaces with lentil-shaped pendants, *bullae* and earrings. Sybille Haynes has suggested that the stela was probably set above the entrance door in the tomb's façade, and interpreted it as a heroization of the dead woman. Yet, because of the very individualized characteristics of the head and of the small building containing it, the relief of the Nenfro stela might represent an *armarium* with its *imago maiorum*. Nenfro stela, Tarquinia, Museo Nazionale Archeologico. See Haynes 2000, 285.

<sup>42</sup> Tomb of the Two Statues at Ceri (second quarter of 7th century BC): two almost life-size figures of bearded and enthroned men are carved in the tomb's vestibule. They represented two families' ancestors seated on a throne; Tomb of Five Chairs at Caere (650–600 BC): five painted

terracotta statuettes of men and women (interpreted as ancestors) enthroned in a row of five rock-carved chairs were placed in a chamber on the left of the *dromos*; Pietrera Tumulus, Vetulonia (third quarter of the 7th century BC): fragment of eight near life-size limestone sculptures of standing men and women (interpreted as ancestors) were placed in the *dromos* of the upper tomb chamber; Tomb of the Hat (first half of the 7th century BC): fragmentary torso of a human figure roughly carved from grey tufa (interpreted as an ancestor) was placed in the entrance corridor of the tomb. For the tomb built to resemble the house see: Pallottino 1942, 384; Steingraber 1983, 37; Naso 1991; Camporeale 2000, 145; Haynes 2000, 72–73; Steingraber 2006b, 89. For the funerary rituals performed inside the Etruscan tombs see: Prayon 1979; Tuck 1994; Steingraber 1997; Pieraccini 2000; 2013. Also in the domestic context we have found representation of ancestors: Murlo Palace (early 6th century BC.): Steingraber 1983, 88–92; Camporeale 2000, 101; Haynes 2000, 118–126; Jannot 2005, 92–94. For the Tomb of Two Statues at Ceri see: Haynes 2000, 74; Camporeale 2009, 224. For the Tomb of Five Chairs see: Prayon 1974; Steingraber 1983, 437; Colonna & von Hase 1984, 13–59; Haynes 2000, 92–93; Thomson de Grummond & Simon 2006, 125–126; Camporeale 2009, 225. For the Pietrera Tumulus see: Steingraber 1983, 140–141; Haynes 2000, 82–83. For the Tomb of the Hat see: Haynes 2000, 73. For cult of ancestors see: Nielsen 1984; Munk Højte 2002; Prayon 2006; Steingraber, 2009, 123–133. For the Etruscan *atrium* see: Prayon 1974; Prayon 2009. Pallottino notes that the beginning of the ancestor cult in Etruscan culture started at the same time as the beginning of the double-name system in which the individual first name (*praenomen*) was followed by the name (*nomen*) of the *gens*: Pallottino 1942, 303; Cristofani 1973, 114–117; Cristofani 1978, 72; Cristofani 1984, 225; Haynes 2000, 69–71.

<sup>43</sup> Camporeale 2000, 168; Camporeale 2009, 220–238. Camporeale traces the origins of the importance of ancestors as far back as the Villanovan period, and discusses a hut urn (Villanovan urn from Bisenzio, 8th century BC) that features an image of ancestor over the door on the roof to symbolize the protection guaranteed to the house-tomb by the ancestors. Thus, ancestors have, in the Etruscan context, a kind of protective role for the family in the domestic space.

<sup>44</sup> Cic. *Pis.* 1; Sen. *Ep.* 44.5; Boe. *Cons.* 1 pros. 1.3.

<sup>45</sup> Polyb. 6.53.6; Juv. 8,2; Val. Max. 4.1.6.

na used to honour his father's *imago* with the laurel wreath.<sup>46</sup> Archaeological evidence like the traces of coloured paint on the Cuma wax head confirm these practices.

All of these references to ritual practices strongly suggest that the *imagines* not only represented powerful status markers but also were honoured because of their active and protective properties. The Cuma wax head, for example, did not represent a prestigious ancestor with the intent of displaying the status of a given family. It was found replacing the head of a decapitated body in a burial, which must have belonged to the victim of murder or more likely to someone who fell into disgrace or was condemned.<sup>47</sup> Some scholars have hypothesized that the relatives of the deceased buried the wax head with the mutilated body in order to guarantee the physical integrity of their beloved in the afterlife.<sup>48</sup> Such a behaviour clearly expressed personal and religious preoccupations rather than a concern with social-political display of status.

From the literary and archaeological evidence we deduce the presence of devotional acts and domestic rituals that involved the *imagines maiorum*. Each of these elements shows that the *imagines maiorum* not only were carriers of status but also active forces that were periodically honoured with rituals.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Cic. *Mur.* 88: *Si, quod Iuppiter omen avertat! Hunc vestris sententiis afflixeritis, quo se miser vertet? Domumne? Ut eam imaginem clarissimi viri, parentis sui, quam pacis ante diebus laureatam in sua gratulatione conspexit, eandem deformatam ignominia lugentemque videat?* ("If you ruin him with your verdict (may Jupiter avert this evil omen), to whom will the wretch turn? To his home? So that he might see the *imago* of the most distinguished man, his father, disfigured by his infamy and in mourning, that same *imago* which a few days before he saw wreathed with laurel to congratulate him?")

<sup>47</sup> The wax head (2nd century AD) was discovered in a closed chamber tomb with its three graves and an urn typical of the Samnite period, and work on this tomb seemed to stop in the 2nd century AD. A coin of Diocletian found inside the tomb indicates that the tomb continued to be used until the 3rd to the beginning of the 4th century AD. In the tomb was found a grave with two skeletons of decapitated people, both with wax heads instead of the skulls, but the second head has not survived. See Drerup 1980, 94–95.

<sup>48</sup> Drerup 1980, 94; Flower 1996, 7.

<sup>49</sup> These practices might have constituted a way to ensure the ancestor's protection. In the Roman context the ancestor cult was strongly connected with protection. The *divi parentum*, since the Archaic period, represented the collectivity of the divinized ancestors, who were invoked to avenge members of the family. Festus, *De Verb. Sign.* 424; Livy, 1.59,10; Catull. *Carm.* 64,403; Sen. *Phaed.* 129. See Bettini 2009, 87–126; Schiavone 2005, 152. Scholars generally agree that the Etruscan cult of ancestors as guardians was eventually absorbed and translated into the worship of the *divi parentum*. See Pallottino 1942, 330–331; Pallottino 1979, 821–822; Torelli 1999, 147; Camporeale 2000, 146. For similarity and overlapping of rituals between the Etruscan and Roman cult of ancestors see: Pallottino 1984, 196; Torelli 1999, 147–149; Camporeale 2000, 146; Camporeale 2009, 220–250. Pallottino has drawn interesting similarities between the Etruscan terms *apas* (father), *apires* (feast of ancestors) and the Latin words meaning parents (*parentes*) and the name

## THE PUBLIC CONTEXT: THE ROLE OF THE *IMAGINES* IN THE FUNERAL

As seen above, historical sources of the late Republican and early Imperial periods describe the *imagines maiorum* as an integral part of aristocratic funerary rituals.<sup>50</sup> Cicero, for example, in describing the death of a disgraced person, writes: "He was thrown out and cremated without *imagines*, without song and games, without funeral rites, without laments, without eulogies, without a funeral."<sup>51</sup> In Polybius's famous description of Roman funerals, the shrines (*armaria*) were first opened and the *imagines*, upon being taken out for the procession, were decorated with the symbols of rank and dressed with the various *togae* according to the offices the deceased had held during their *cursus honorum*.<sup>52</sup> Then the *imagines* entered the funeral procession in a chariot and accompanied the corpse to its final destination.

Scholars have customarily interpreted the Roman funeral exclusively in its secular and civic aspects. As famously stated by Georges Dumézil, the funerary procession did not belong to ancestral cults but was performed in order to display the glory of one's aristocratic lineage.<sup>53</sup> But if the *imagines* had only a secular and civic function, why did ancient Romans not use them also during other pageants, such as the Triumph or wedding ceremonies, in which the display of family honours might have been as important?

This final section, through an analysis of both historical and archaeological sources, argues that the presence of *imagines maiorum* in the funeral procession (*pompa funebris*), in addition to displaying the prestige of a given aristocratic lineage, served ritual, protective purposes to the advantage of the whole household. Through a comparative analysis of ancient Etruscan rituals, my research focuses on the specific function and position of the *imagines* during public processions and on the symbolic meaning of the activities associated with the *armaria* doors.

First of all, it is important to note that the lightness of the material, the wax with which the *imagines maiorum* were made, distinguished them from other more solid and permanent representations of ancestors in metal and stone. The *imagines* were especially conceived, as we observed in the Barberini statue, as portable objects. Probably because of their perishability, the *imagines* were stored in closed wooden

for the days on which ancestors were honoured (*parentalia*). Pallottino 1942, 330–331.

<sup>50</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 2.73.1; Plin. *HN* 35.6; Hor. *Epod.* 8.11–12; Dio Cass. 56.34; Diod. 31.25.2; Porph; Livy, 38.56.12–13; Livy, 48; Sen. *Con.* 1. 6. 3–4; Tac. *Ann.* 3.5 and 3.76 and 4.9.2; Val. Max. 4.1.6.

<sup>51</sup> Cic. *Mil.* 86.

<sup>52</sup> Polyb. 6.53–54.

<sup>53</sup> Dumézil 1977, 321; also Gruen 1992, 155; Flower 1996, 2, 90.





Fig. 4. Marble grave relief, 1st century BC to 1st century AD, National Museum, Copenhagen. Photo published with permission of the National Museum of Denmark.

shrines and displayed only on special occasions.<sup>54</sup> Yet, the act of opening the doors of the shrines, which the literary sources never fail to emphasize, might have constituted an integral part of an ancient funerary ritual.<sup>55</sup>

Archaeological evidence confirms the presence of doors in the *armaria*. In the ancestor shrine of the House of Menander, the two large iron nails that were found over the niche containing the *imagines* suggest that the *armaria* were usually closed off by a wooden door or a curtain.<sup>56</sup> Doors were also found in the House of the Bicentenary at Herculaneum, in a wooden container that scholars have interpreted as an *armarium*.<sup>57</sup> A grave relief in the Copenhagen National Museum shows the profiles of two heads of a man and woman facing each other, which are contained in shrines that clearly represent *armaria*. Both heads are visible through the open doors of a shrine (Fig. 4).<sup>58</sup> The context of the representation of these ancestral heads (probably the parents of the deceased) is clearly a funerary one.

The *armaria* doors, as we have seen, were ordinarily kept closed but were opened on the occasion of a funerary procession (*pompa funebris*). The emphasis of the Latin authors on the gesture of opening the *armaria* doors might belie a further ritual significance, which can be analysed in light of the persistence in Roman society of Etruscan domestic and funerary rituals.

In Etruria, since the Archaic period (c. 570 BC), false doors were depicted on the back walls of tombs, as most schol-

ars agree, to represent the gateway to the Underworld.<sup>59</sup> And such a powerful symbol was often connected with representations of the ancestors. For example, in the Tomb of the Augurs in Tarquinia (dated 520 BC) the portraits of two aristocrats in a mourning attitude appear at the two sides of the representation of a closed door (Fig. 5).<sup>60</sup> One of them is identified in the fresco as a priest (*tanasar*), while the other, bearded and clearly older, as a father-priest (*apas-tanasar*).<sup>61</sup> According to such a scene, it is evident that ancient Etruscans believed that ancestors joined funerary priests in accompanying the dead in their journey to the afterlife. In the iconography of Etruscan tombs of the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, the role of the ancestors in funerary rituals appears even more clearly.<sup>62</sup> In that period, the ancestors would be represented together with demons (the customary psychopomps, or the guides of souls

<sup>59</sup> Tomb of the Mouse, Tarquinia, back wall, c. 520 BC; Tomb of the Augurs, Tarquinia, back wall, c. 520 BC; Tomb of the Inscriptions, 520 BC; Cardarelli Tomb, Tarquinia, back wall c. 510–500 BC; Tomb of the Jade Lions, Tarquinia, third and beginning of the fourth quarter of the 6th century BC; Tomb of the Casuccini Hill, Tarquinia, right wall of the main chamber, second quarter of the 5th century BC; Tomb of the Charuns, Tarquinia, second quarter of the 3rd century BC. See Pallottino 1942, 338; Bonfante 1986, 268; Torelli 1999, 147; Haynes 2000, 234–237; Jannot 2005, 54, 65; Bonfante & Swaddling 2006, 31; Steingraber 2006a, 99; Steingraber, 2006b, 66; Thomson de Grummond 2006, 212; Thomson de Grummond & Simon 2006, 66–70.

<sup>60</sup> Tomb of the Augurs, Tarquinia, c. 520 BC. See: Steingraber 1983, 382–383; Steingraber 1984, 289 (pls. 13–14); Bonfante 1986, 268–269; Haynes 2000, 231–233; Steingraber 2006b, 92–93; Torelli 1999, 147–148; Jannot 2005, 59.

<sup>61</sup> Torelli 1999, 147–148; Steingraber 2006b, 92–93.

<sup>62</sup> Tomb 5636, Tarquinia, second half of the 3rd century BC; Tomb of Querciola II, second half of the 3rd century BC; Bruschi Sarcophagus, Tarquinia 2nd century BC. These tombs and this sarcophagus present the final stage of the journey to the underworld where the deceased is represented close to the door to the Underworld with demons and members of his family waiting for him.

<sup>54</sup> Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1932, 26; Flower 1996, 202–209.

<sup>55</sup> Polyb. 6.53.6; Cic. *Sul.* 88; Tac. *Hist.* 19.6; Sen. *Con.* 7.6.10.

<sup>56</sup> Flower 1996, 42.

<sup>57</sup> Orr 1972, 128; Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1932, 24; Giacobello 2008, 72; De Carolis 2007, 138; Corpus B n 2.

<sup>58</sup> Marble relief in Copenhagen National Museum (inv. no. 1187), 1st century BC to 1st century AD, see Flower 1996, 7; Gruen 1992, 155; Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1932, 26.



Fig. 5. Tomb of the Augurs, c. 520 BC, Tarquinia, back wall. Photo published with permission of the German Archaeological Institute, photographer: Schwanke, Neg. D-DAl-Rom F82.85.

into the Underworld) by the gates of the Underworld in the act of welcoming the deceased (Fig. 6).<sup>63</sup>

It is plausible that doors and gateways retained this symbolic function also in the Roman context. In fact, both visual and literary representations placed doors in Roman funerary context.<sup>64</sup> Jean-René Jannot, for example, has pointed out that the *Aeneid's* description of the Underworld presents strong

similarities with Etruscan depictions of the gate of the City of the Dead in paintings and urns.<sup>65</sup> Hence, in the Roman funerary context the door represents the gateway, the passage between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

<sup>63</sup> Steingräber 2006b, 187–188; 261–262; Jannot 2005, 65.

<sup>64</sup> A marble relief from the Tomb of Haterii shows a mourning scene in the *atrium* (late 1st century AD, Vatican Museum): for a discussion of this relief, see Bianchi Bandinelli 1969, 217; Bianchi Bandinelli & Torelli 2008, Tab. 107. Also the Tomb of Vestorius Priscus, Pompeii, outside the

Porta del Vesuvio, 1st century AD. see Clarke 2003, 386, figs. 114 and 200; Cormack 2007, 597.

<sup>65</sup> Jannot 2005, 68; Verg. *Aen* 6.548 and 6.637. We know also from Tacitus that in the domestic context the doors of a house play a role in funerary rituals. In fact during the lying-in-state (*collocatio*) of the corpse inside the house, the doors of the *domus*, as a symbol of mourning, were closed with a branch of foliage fixed to the outside (Tac. *Ann.* 2.83.3).





Fig. 6. Tomb 5636, second half of the 3rd century BC, Tarquinia. Photo published with permission of the German Archaeological Institute, photographer: Schwanke, Neg. D-DAI-Rom F82.182.

Roman sources report that in aristocratic funerals the act of opening the door was followed by the procession of the *imagines maiorum* on parade with the living members of the family of the deceased.<sup>66</sup> As Pliny noted, the *imagines* “accompany funerals in the extended family. And whenever someone died, the whole crowd of his family members who had ever lived was present”.<sup>67</sup> The fact that the various sources, in describing the funeral, mention the *imagines* in connection with verbs such as *anteferre*, *efferre*, and *praeferre*, suggests that the *imagines* preceded the corpse in the procession,<sup>68</sup> whereas Polybius’s usage of the term ἐξῆς “in order” has made Maurizio Bettini hypothesize that the *imagines* were displayed in chronological order, from the older to the younger.<sup>69</sup>

On the one hand the procession would represent a public display of the prestige and status of the family of the recently deceased. On the other hand, as a procession, it marked the movement from one realm to another (i.e. from the world of the living to the world of the dead). The opening of the doors of the shrines symbolized the beginning of the journey, and the momentary re-connection of the two realms. It is in this latter idea that the Etruscan material is most relevant.

The similarities between Etruscan and Roman conceptions about afterlife might be explained by considering the possibil-

ity of cultural transmission and the persistence of shared Italic ritual traditions.<sup>70</sup> In this regard, it is noteworthy that Etruscan tomb paintings and funerary urns began to represent processions of magistrates dressed in a Roman manner starting with the 3rd century BC, when Rome was already established in Italy as the leading political and cultural force (Fig. 7).<sup>71</sup> It is also at this same time that Etruscan and Roman artists began to depict highly individualized portraits, whose detailed representation of facial features would characterize the *imagines maiorum* as well.<sup>72</sup>

Steingraber, in his analysis of the Bruschi Tomb in Tarquinia (beginning of the 3rd century BC), has interpreted the presence on the back wall of two distinct processions of magistrates as the meeting of the living members of the family

<sup>66</sup> Polyb. 6.53.6.

<sup>67</sup> Plin. *HN* 35.2.

<sup>68</sup> Hor. *Epod.* 8.11–12; Porph.; Sen. *Controv.* 1.6.3–4; Tac. *Ann.* 3.76.

<sup>69</sup> Polyb. 6.53.9. See Bettini 1986, 177; Flower 1996, 99.

<sup>70</sup> Pallottino 1984, 20–21, 194–200; Holliday 2002, 128–143.

<sup>71</sup> Tomb of the Typhon, Tarquinia, end of the 3rd century BC; Tomb of the Conference, Tarquinia, Monterozzi, first half of the 3rd century BC; Bruschi Tomb, Tarquinia, beginning of the 3rd century BC; Tomb 5512, Tarquinia, second half of the 3rd century BC; urn in the Museo Guarnacci, urn in the Palazzo Inghirami. For the parallels between Roman funerary processions and the Etruscan paintings, see: Ling 1991, 8–9; Gruen 1992, 138; Flower 1996, 190; Steingraber 2006a, 195, 250–252; Holliday 2002, 128–140. Holliday (2002, 128) wrote: “Just as the triumphal celebrations used by the generals to secure their *Gloria* had their origins in ancient Italic rites, various conventions and iconographical features of Roman funeral ceremonies also had Italic precedents. The most ancient representations of solemn procession come from Etruscan necropolis, and fourth and third century B.C.”

<sup>72</sup> Steingraber 1984, 307; Steingraber 2006a, 189; Holliday 2002, 131.





Fig. 7. Tomb of the Meeting, Tarquinia, Procession of togati, first half of the 3rd century BC. Photo published with permission of the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici dell'Etruria Meridionale.

with the ancestors (Fig. 8).<sup>73</sup> Likewise in Roman funerals, the living members of the family proceeded along with the *imagines maiorum*—representations of the dead. The visual representation in the Bruschi Tomb seems to illustrate important ritual similarities with the description of the Roman funeral. In addition to showing the political status of the magistrates, the processions in the Bruschi Tomb added further layers of meaning that connected the Etruscan tradition to the Roman one: the procession as journey to the Underworld; the meeting of the living and the dead; the ancestors' welcome to the deceased.

Hence, it can be said that the presence of *imagines maiorum* represented the continuity between the world of the living and the world of the dead. During the *pompa funebris*, the living family bid the deceased the last farewell, while the an-

cestors' *imagines*, by leading the procession, introduced him to a new dimension and status. Thus, the opening of the doors of the shrines symbolized the beginning of the journey and the momentary re-connection of the two realms.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to offer new insights into some controversial aspects concerning the appearance, the function, and the symbolism of the *imagines maiorum* through a comparative analysis of Etruscan and Roman evidence. Scholars have customarily interpreted the *imagines maiorum* as wax masks that were worn by actors who impersonated the dead during the funeral procession. Since members of the Roman aristocracy would display the *imagines* of those ancestors who had held an important office, most authors have considered the function of these portraits as specifically social and politi-

<sup>73</sup> Steingraber 1984, 298, Steingraber 2006b, 254–255; Holliday 2002, 129.

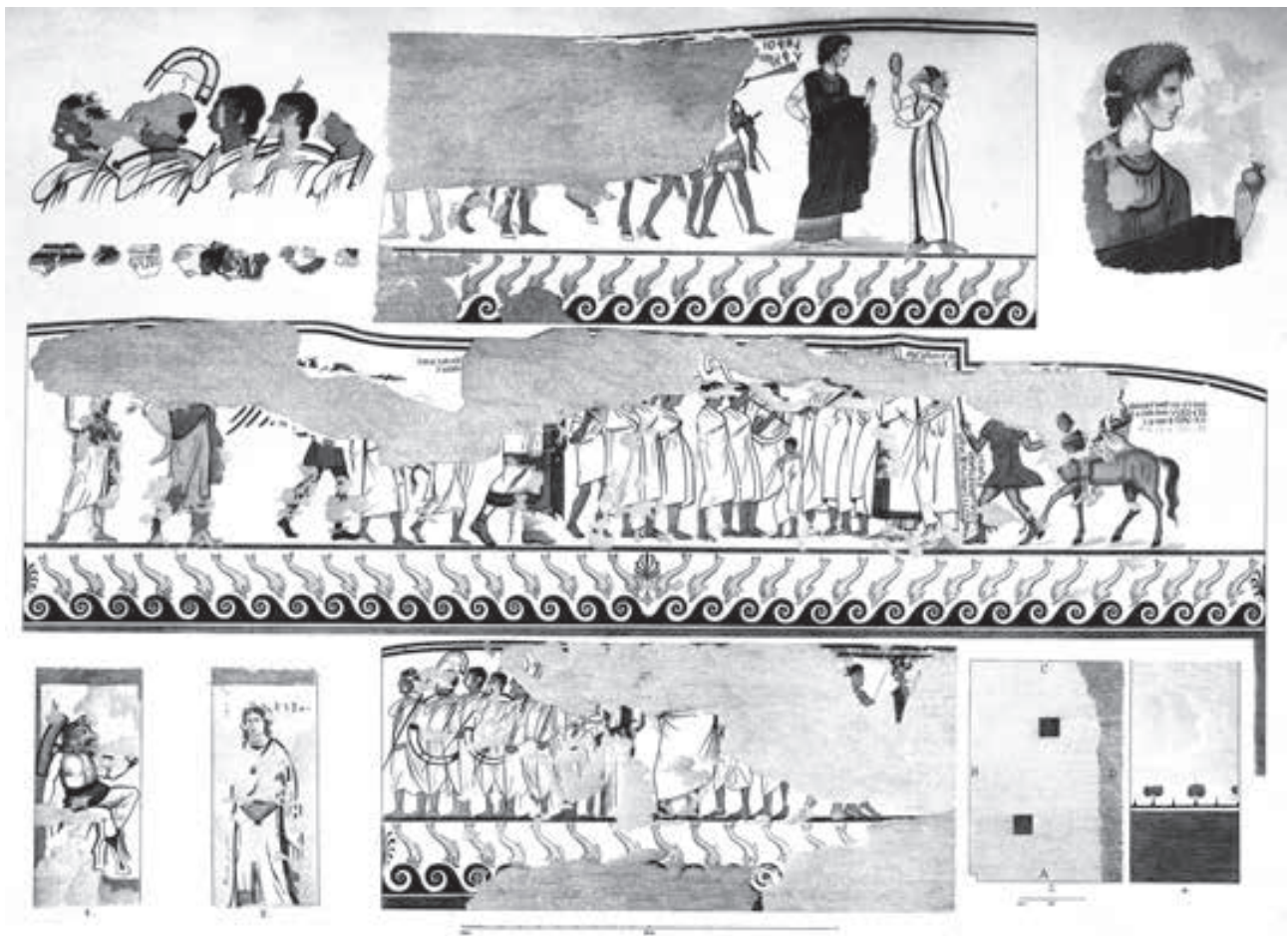


Fig. 8. Bruschi Tomb, beginning of the 3rd century BC, Tarquinia. Photo published with permission of the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici dell'Etruria Meridionale.

cal and therefore devoid of any domestic, ritual or symbolic value.

In terms of their appearance, through close analysis of the literary and material evidence, I have demonstrated that the *imagines* were not masks but complete, portable, wax heads. As for their function, I have shown that *imagines* also retained a fundamental ritualistic function that is understandable in light of ancient Etruscan ancestral rituals. It is of great significance, as we have seen, that the *imagines* were located in the *atrium*, the entrance of the typical aristocratic house, not only as symbols of a family's illustrious genealogy, but also because of their protective function. There is convincing evidence that the *imagines* were objects of specific, periodic ritual acts (burning of incense, application of colours and laurel).

Finally, it is my belief that the *imagines maiorum* paraded in the funeral procession had a further significance beyond celebrating the glory of an aristocratic family: from the ritual

opening of shrines to the arrival at the tomb, the *imagines maiorum* represented the ancestors who, together with the living, accompanied the deceased in his journey to the after-life—a scene depicted in several Etruscan tombs.

Historical sources attest to the fact that the tradition of the *imagines maiorum* seems to disappear with end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.<sup>74</sup> Augustus's imperial propaganda<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Pliny in the 1st century AD, laments that the *imagines maiorum* were no longer popular (*HN* 35.2). Many scholars believe that the *imagines* vanished rapidly from aristocratic *atria* and funerals under the Julio-Claudian emperors: Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1932, 61; Drerup 1980, 105; Flower 1996, 223.

<sup>75</sup> The use of the *imagines*, common in the Republic, was also a feature of the funerals of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. In fact, they become more spectacular and memorable in their appearance in events like the Triumph and also eventually included the *imagines* of the legendary ancestors of Rome. Augustus uses the *imagines* specifically for his own



appropriated the ancestors' symbolism and instead involved grandiose public honours offered to the legendary ancestors of Rome. Thus, such imperial acts could have shifted attention away from and outshone the individual family's ancestors, and may have led to a complete transformation of the category of the *imagines maiorum* from objects of private ritual to those of the political sphere and, ultimately, brought about their demise.

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political purposes. The complex iconography of the Forum of Augustus with the statue of Trojan ancestry, Alban kings, Romulus and all Julio-Claudian ancestors, is meant to call to mind the display of the *imagines* in the *atrium* with their *tituli*. Therefore, Augustus uses ancestor iconography in order to represent the empire as a family and himself as *pater familias*, ("father of family") and *pater patria*, ("father of his country"). In this logic of identification in the empire is collocated the addition of the legendary ancestors. See Dio Cass. 53.30.5: funeral of Marcellus, Dio Cass. 56.34: funeral of Agrippa, Tac. *Ann.* 3.5: funeral of Druso, funeral of Octavia; Dio Cass. 56.34.3: funeral of Augustus. For the Forum of Augustus's relationship to the *atrium*, see Ov. *Fast.* 1. 589–592: "And the whole empire was returned to our people and your grandfather was given the name Augustus. Survey the wax *imagines* arranged round the *atria* of the well-born: so great a name was bestowed on no other man". For Augustus's use of the *imagines*, see: Swift 1923, 286–301; Rowell 1940, 131–142; Wiseman 1974, 153–164; Price 1987, 64–65; Zanker 1990, 129–130 and 192–193; Flower 1996, 224–225, 228; Favro & Johanson 2010, 12–37.

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