



SCARABS AND SEALS IN THE CENTRAL ITALIAN PENINSULA: A SHORT OVERVIEW (EARLY IRON AGE–LATE ORIENTALIZING PERIOD)

Enrico Giovanelli

Università degli Studi di Milano

ABSTRACT

Scarabs and seals are still considered one of the hallmarks of the relationship between the Etruscan and Italic people and the rest of the Mediterranean. Starting from the most recent studies, this brief synthesis aims to give an updated synopsis on several aspects linked to these items.

The presence of Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects during the first centuries of the 1st millennium BCE in the Italian peninsula has been discussed in several contributions in the last years.¹ In terms of the most frequently discovered, aegyptiaca (most of them scarabs) are still currently considered as one of the most important and valuable markers of the contacts between pre-Roman Italy and the rest of the Mediterranean.

900–750 BCE

The most ancient imports to Italy are four scarabs found in the Early Iron Age necropolis of Torre Galli, Calabria. They belong to female burials dating to the end of the 10th century/the beginning of the 9th century BCE, and De Salvia has evaluated them as Egyptian and Levantine products of the end of the 2nd/beginning of the 1st millennium BCE.² Afterwards scarabs have mainly been documented

on the mid-Tyrrhenian coast (Etruria, Latium and Campania).

At Tarquinii a scarab from a Villanovan *pozzetto* tomb is apparently intriguing (FIG. 1). The burial dates back to the end of the 9th/beginning of the 8th century BCE, but the cartouche reports the name Khaneferre Sobekhotep IV, a pharaoh of the Thirteenth Dynasty, so theoretically it should be much older than its final context suggests and could be considered a sort of *keimelion*.³ However, this interpretation is improbable. In fact, Hölbl already excluded the interpretation that this scarab is an original 2nd-millennium product. It is more likely to be one of several cases of the reproduction of a 2nd-millennium cartouche on a much later piece.⁴ Recently, De Salvia offered another reminder that, during the first centuries of the Third Intermediate Period, many workshops were still producing quite good steatite and faience pieces.⁵ Several scarabs



FIGURE 1: Scarab from a Villanovan pozzetto grave (9th/8th century BCE), Tarquinii (after Giovanelli 2015, 108, n. LL1).

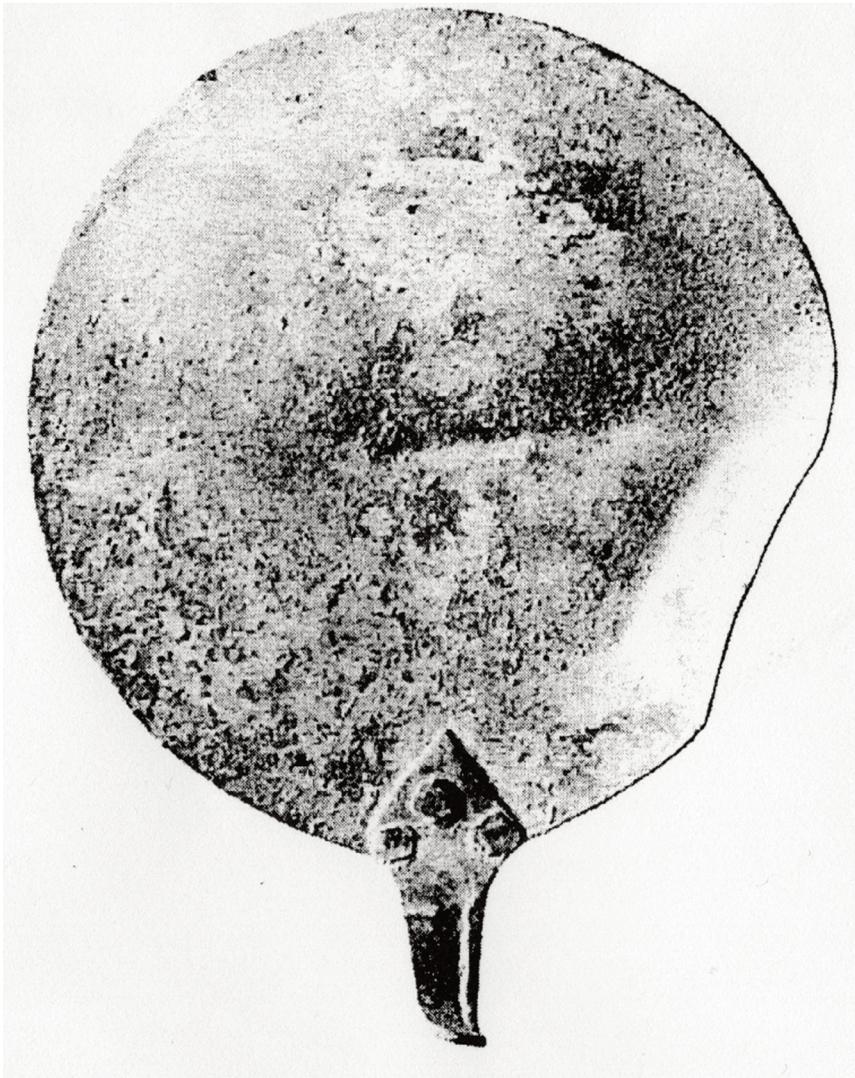


FIGURE 2: Mycenaean mirror from tomb 77, Poggio Selciatello, Tarquinii (after Giovanelli 2017, fig. 2).

have also been found at Veii and Capua in burials dating to the first half of the 8th century BCE.

These first imports have been attributed to Levantine traders, usually identified as Cypriots and (slightly later) Phoenicians. As recently confirmed by d'Agostino, these items precede (or at least minimally overlap) the earliest Greek Geometric pottery findings in Italy, which cannot be dated to before 775/750 BCE.⁶

We should also remember that some pre-colonial Aegean imports have been documented from two of the above-mentioned sites, i.e., Tarquinii and Capua.

At Tarquinii, a Mycenaean mirror has been found in a *pozzetto* Villanovan burial dated to the 9th century BCE (FIG. 2). This mirror could have been made by a workshop whose activity could be placed in the Dodecanese (maybe Rhodes?) or in Cyprus. The mirror, even though it is more ancient than the context in which it was found, should have reached Italy just a little before its deposition into the grave. It could have circulated for a while in the Aegean before being imported, probably by a merchant from the East.⁷ Mycenaean *keimeilia* of sorts had a fair circulation considering how frequently they are found in Protogeometric and Geometric tombs in Greece (this phenomenon is also recorded at Rhodes in some votive depots).⁸ More recently a fragment of white painted ware (FIG. 3) has been discovered in Pian di Civita, Tarquinii. It could be a genuine Cypriot import from the 10th/9th century BCE or, at least, a good Phoenician imitation from the 9th/8th BCE.⁹ Finally, a Cypriot cauldron

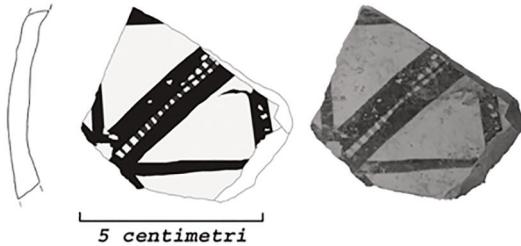


FIGURE 3: Fragment of white painted ware from Pian di Civita, Tarquinii (after Bagnasco Gianni, Facchetti, Cultraro 2016, 38, fig. 2).



FIGURE 4: Cypriot cauldron from Capua (after Melandri, Sirano 2014, 213, fig. 2).

(FIG. 4) belonging to a princely 9th century BCE tomb was discovered in 2005 at Capua.¹⁰

Scarabs from this early phase seem to confirm this recently depicted framework of contacts between the Italian peninsula and the Eastern Mediterranean because they are mainly of Egyptian, Cypriot, Phoenician, and Syrian origin.¹¹

Even if this has not been so frequently documented, in this period scarabs were already appreciated by local communities: in fact, at Veii amber imitations (scarabs and scaraboids produced by a local workshop) have been recorded in tombs

since the IIB local phase (760–730 BCE). The details of these beetles are very schematic, and simple figures of Villanovan tradition are represented on the bases (FIG. 5). Another workshop in Vetulonia mainly produced particular scaraboids in the same period: they are much larger and their back is ribbed (FIG. 6). Amber scarabs and scaraboids are also spread throughout other sites in Etruria, Latium, and Campania starting from the Early Orientalizing period. The choice of amber as material can be explained by several reasons: it was very well-known material that had been used for a long time

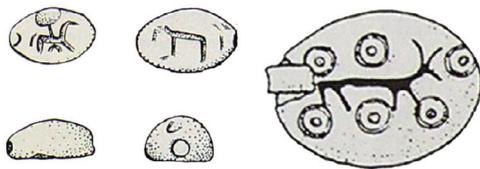


FIGURE 5: Amber scaraboids from Quattro Fontanili, Veii (after Giovannelli 2012, 783, fig. 1).



FIGURE 6: Amber ribbed scaraboid from Vetulonia (courtesy of the Civico Museo Archeologico, Grosseto).

in Italy, and, during the early Iron Age, the carving technique had already reached a very high level. Moreover, it is a material with specific health properties. Considering its specific connection with the sun, we cannot exclude the fact that it could be intentionally used to imitate objects with the same links and values.¹²

750-630 BCE

During the final part of the early Iron Age and at the beginning of the Orientalizing period the number of scarabs considerably increased, and they were still most highly concentrated in the mid-Tyrrhenian area. The discoveries of the last years do not change this trend as it has already been traced by Hölbl.¹³ Notably we should mention a new scarab from Vulci, found in a rich tomb dated to the beginning of the 7th century BCE, reporting the cartouche of the pharaoh Bocchoris (FIG. 7).¹⁴ This scarab joins the other one found in Pithekoussai, the famous faience vase from the homonym tomb in Tarquinia and its incomplete twin, now in Palermo. As is widely known, these items set the conventional beginning of the Orientalizing period in the Italian peninsula at the time of the pharaoh. Even though we have no contextual information about the vase preserved in Palermo, the one from Tarquinia belongs to a very rich tomb of a member of the local aristocracy. In this case we cannot exclude the possibility of a gift exchange.¹⁵



FIGURE 7: Scarabs with the cartouche of the pharaoh Bocchoris. **a:** from Pithekoussai; **b:** from Vulci (after Giovanelli 2017, fig. 1).

In this phase, scarabs of the Perachora-Lindos type (whose workshops are mainly settled in Rhodes) also began to reach Italy and, shortly afterwards, had become the main form of production documented.¹⁶ This shift is particularly evident in Pithekoussai. The most ancient tombs (750–725 BCE) still showed a wide variety of imports, but during the following phase (725–700 BCE) Rhodian products overcame the others.¹⁷

Pithekoussai is the yardstick for all of the mid-Tyrrhenian peninsula for other aspects too. Scarabs and seals are very frequent in island burials, and it seems that they were accepted as quite standard elements in the funerary custom. They are especially found in child and female tombs, as they were amulets for their protection.¹⁸ This funerary practice also developed in Pontecagnano, and a Pithekoussian influence has frequently been evoked. This phenomenon involves other centers in the pre-Roman Campania, for example in the Sarno valley.¹⁹

The transmission of the values and the ideas linked to these objects could have been favored by people movements. Pithekoussai was an emporion, open to various ethnicities: the presence of Levantine and also Etruscan individuals has been always considered. Regarding the scarabs, De Salvia remarks that the transmission of knowledge about their use and values was oral and particularly involved women.²⁰

If Pontecagnano and other pre-Roman sites in Campania show the marked prevalence of Perachora-Lindos types,²¹ by contrast the situation of Capua is quite different. As previously said, the presence of scarabs has been dated to earlier than the other Campanian sites. The variety of products remains and no one scarab has yet been found in a definitive child burial. Therefore, Capua reflects that the same trend was occurring as in Etruria and Latium where, at the beginning of the Orientalizing period, scarabs were still prevalently of Egyptian or Levantine origin and they are almost undocumented in child tombs.²²

This common trend between Capua and Etruria (especially in the south: Tarquinii, Veii, Caere, Vulci) can be also testified by a particular group of scarabs that are not of Egyptian origin. They are quite small, made of blue paste, and the beetle is very simple. The base is often decorated with stylized animal figures (FIG. 8). Although derived from hieroglyphic cartouches, they can at least be considered as their distant relatives. Firstly, the production of these scarabs has generically been placed in western Asia.



FIGURE 8: Scarabs attributed to the Tell Tayinat workshop. **a:** from Tell Tayinat; **b:** from Athens; **c:** from Anavyssos; **d:** from Capua (after Giovanelli 2017, fig. 4; re-elaboration from Hölbl 2016).

More recently, Hölbl observed that their workshop should be placed in Tell Tayinat, which is not so far away from the Al-Mina emporion. These scarabs have also been found in Greece and the Aegean, but the majority come from Italy.^{23s}

This is not the only case of a single type or production appreciated by the Etruscan elites. There are several tombs with more than one scarab that can be attributed to the same workshop or at least to the same typology. In other cases, scarabs of the same type have been found in the same necropolis in coeval tombs. So, we must face the possibility that they were bought in lots by one or more members of these communities.²⁴ The Lyre Player group seals are probably the most evident case. More than 100 of them were found in the Lacco Ameno necropolis, and other samples reached Etruria, Ager Faliscus, and Campania.²⁵ The area of their production has long been debated. John Boardman argued that North Syria was most probable due to their stylistic and formal similarities with another group of seals produced there.²⁶ Edith Porada, who was the first to

recognize this production, believed that it was born in Syria before being developed in other territories, such as Rhodes.²⁷ More recently Marina Martelli has also shared Porada's view.²⁸ The complete edition of the Lyre Player seals from the votive depot at the sanctuary of Athena at Jalysos supports this last hypothesis. Besides being the second site in terms of whole numbers after Pithekoussai, this depot also restituted a few jeweler monocles associated with them. They are magnifying lenses made of rock crystal. These tools could have been dedicated to the goddess by the gem-engravers working in the vicinity of the sanctuary. Therefore, it is probable that a workshop moved from western Asia and settled on the island.²⁹

630/620–580/570 BCE

The final part of the Orientalizing period showed a drastic drop in the presence of scarabs in the burials. Nowadays we still have only two large numbers of scarabs from the votive depots of the temples of Portonaccio (Veii) and Satricum.³⁰ As in Greece, both of the sacred areas were dedicated to healing cults related to goddesses. Even though at Portonaccio the main god was Aplu, during the last decades of the 7th century BCE and the first part of the 6th century BCE a type of Menerva with particular aspects linked to health and divination was also venerated,³¹ while at Sacricum Mater Matuta remained the main goddess.³² This change has been always attributed to the development and consolidation of the city and its system, meaning that the goods shifted from the funerary and private sector to the sacred and public dimension. This phenomenon was particularly stimulated in southern Etruria and ancient Latium by the progressive intervention of sumptuary laws during the Archaic Period.³³ The scarabs from Veii and Satricum are mainly of Naucratis origin. As is widely known, Naucratis had superseded Rhodes in this type of production by end of the 7th century BCE, gaining the same commercial success.³⁴

In this last phase of the Orientalizing period just a few scarabs reached the Adriatic coast, and they were still mainly Naucratis products or other late Egyptianizing imitations. As on the Tyrrhenian coast, they were found mainly in female aristocratic burials. Their later arrival could be explained by the general trend on the mid-Adriatic coast where consolidated commercial routes with the Aegean and Levant developed only during this chronological phase.³⁵ An exception is constituted by Verucchio,

where three steatite scarabs have been documented from burials in the second half of the 8th century BCE. These scarabs are still good products of the Nile Delta region. They were most probably imported from the Tyrrhenian coast through the Marecchia valley rather than having reached Verucchio directly from the Adriatic.³⁶ The same hypothesis might be applied to a group of ivory seals of Aegean origin found at Terni. In this case they could have been brought there through the Tiber valley.³⁷

USAGE

As has been previously considered, scarabs and seals seem to be prevalently linked to women and are definitively attributed to children in Pithekoussai and some centers of Campania. This general framework could be accepted, but we must remember that it is often very difficult to assess the death age of the individuals. Moreover, in Etruria and Latium children were frequently buried in inhabited areas and not in necropoleis until the end of the 7th century BCE.³⁸

If we consider these objects in single necropoleis, even rich and extended ones, they are only found sporadically. The only exception is the necropolis of Caolino del Sasso di Furbara, in the Caeretan district, dated to the final Villanovan period. Here, ten of forty-two burials included scarabs, but this necropolis is too a small sample (probably it was used for no more than one generation) and cannot be absolutely considered as a diagnostic.³⁹

Like other Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects, scarabs were considered firstly as amulets, but the ideas and values linked to them are not only of original and direct Egyptian derivation. These concepts were filtered by Semitic people. As an example of this confluence of various ideas, we can mention certain types of mounts in which scarabs could be inserted. They are sickle or elliptic pendants (FIG. 9). These types are of Levantine origin deriving from 2nd millennium BCE pendants documented in Mesopotamia. They resemble the crescent moon and were considered as amulets without any other object inserted in. As noted by De Salvia, they were reasonably associated with scarabs in those areas where contact between different peoples was frequent, such as Al-Mina, Cyprus, the Dodecanese, and Pithekoussai itself. These pendants were probably also produced in Pithekoussai, and in Etruria they seem to have been almost immediately



FIGURE 9: Sickle pendant (right, from Pithekoussai) and elliptic pendant (left, from Bisenzio) (after Giovannelli 2016, 453, fig. 1).

adopted and imitated, considering the chronology of the first findings. Moreover, sometimes they are not mounted with an imported item but a local amber one. Finally, the complex re-elaboration of this kind of pendant (from Vulci, Narce and Colle del Forno) testifies to their full integration in the local jewelry making. Scarabs and pendants were probably worn as part of necklaces or stoles, as was done in Cyprus.⁴⁰ In a Lucanian tomb we have registered the unique case of a rich woman buried with a notable diadem made of scarabs, amber beads and cowries.⁴¹

Besides the ornamental and apotropaic role of scarabs, it has been discussed if they could have had other functions. Their use as seals still remains doubtful during the early Iron Age and the Orientalizing period. In fact, there is no trace of their use in sealing local pottery (there has only been one case of a sealed pot at Chiavari, but an Aegean gem was used).⁴² Moreover, the abovementioned sickle and elliptic pendants, even though they have the swivel ring, are not suited for use in sealing: frequently the band that wraps the scarab is too thick and covers part of the base. More probably their use as seal (intended also as a way of self-representation, as argued by Torelli) began in the second half of the 6th century BCE when the first Greek gem engravers settled in Etruria and a proper local production developed.⁴³

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NOTES

- ¹ See Giovanelli 2015 and Schweizer 2016, both with references.
- ² De Salvia 1999; Giovanelli 2017.
- ³ As suggested in Delpino 1998–1999.
- ⁴ Hölbl 1979, cat. no. 226.
- ⁵ De Salvia 2011.
- ⁶ d’Agostino 2013; d’Agostino 2016.
- ⁷ Delpino 1998–1999; Delpino 2000; Giovanelli 2017. Delpino argued that the mirror was an original Peloponnesean product from the 15th century BCE, but other scholars considered it as more recent (13th century BCE) and of Cypriot or Dodecanesean origin.
- ⁸ d’Agostino 2006; Marketou 2009; D’Acunto 2015. I am grateful to Isabella Bossolino for the updated bibliographical information about Rhodes.
- ⁹ Bagnasco Gianni et al. 2016.
- ¹⁰ Melandri 2011, 402 n. 44; Melandri and Sirano 2016.
- ¹¹ Giovanelli 2015, 441–442.
- ¹² Giovanelli 2012.
- ¹³ Hölbl 1979, 142–158; Giovanelli 2015.
- ¹⁴ Carosi and Regoli 2014.
- ¹⁵ Giovanelli 2017.
- ¹⁶ Giovanelli 2015, 441–442.
- ¹⁷ Nizzo 2007, 38–40; Nizzo 2011.
- ¹⁸ Nizzo 2007, 38–40; 2011.
- ¹⁹ Giovanelli 2015, 420–422; Giovanelli 2017.
- ²⁰ De Salvia 1993; De Salvia 2011.
- ²¹ Giovanelli 2015, 441–442.
- ²² Melandri 2011, 416–423; Giovanelli 2015, 421–422. Only by the end of the 8th/beginning of the

- 7th century BCE did the Perachora-Lindos type appear at Capua, reflecting in some ways the same change evidenced in Pithekoussai, and it became prevalent during the rest of the Orientalizing period.
- ²³ Hölbl 2016; Giovanelli 2017.
- ²⁴ Giovanelli 2016a; Giovanelli 2017.
- ²⁵ Rizzo 2008–2009.
- ²⁶ Boardman and Buchner 1966; Boardman 1990.
- ²⁷ Porada 1956.
- ²⁸ Martelli 1988; Martelli 1991.
- ²⁹ Rizzo 2007.
- ³⁰ Giovanelli 2015, 96–102, 352–370.
- ³¹ Colonna 2002.
- ³² Gnade 2007.
- ³³ Colonna 1977; Bartoloni et al. 2009; Palmieri 2009.
- ³⁴ Giovanelli 2015, 425.
- ³⁵ Capriotti Vittozzi 1999; Rocco 1997.
- ³⁶ Giovanelli 2015, 411.
- ³⁷ Rocco 1997; Giovanelli 2016a.
- ³⁸ Bartoloni 2003, 103–105; Giovanelli 2015, 420–422.
- ³⁹ Giovanelli 2015, 420; Giovanelli 2017.
- ⁴⁰ De Salvia 1993; Giovanelli 2016b.
- ⁴¹ Bianco 2012.
- ⁴² Giovanelli 2016b. In Greece we can mention two scarabs (one from the Western Gate at Eretria and the other one from Dypilon) whose mounts could be suited for a use in sealing: Bérard 1970, 14–16; De Salvia 1978, 1033.
- ⁴³ Torelli 2002.