

# Unearthing the History of Tufts' Own Tomb Wall with a Funerary Scene

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Fresco with a funeral scene, 5th-4th century BCE, Limestone, Greco-Lucanian. Image courtesy of Tufts University Art Gallery.

## Research Question:

- Identify and interpret an unpublished fragment of a tomb fresco in the Tufts Art Collection from the ancient Greek, Lucanian, and Roman town of Paestum in Southern Italy.

## Background:

- Paestum or Poseidonia, from where the above tomb wall comes, is located in modern day Southern Italy. Poseidonia was situated right at the border of Etruscan and Greek colonized territory.
- As control of Poseidonia fluctuated between the Greeks and the Lucanians (an Italic tribe), Greek and Italic traditions were combined in Paestum to create a unique culture that is depicted on the many tomb walls that have been found there.
- Painting schools in Paestum were commissioned to make these tomb walls. Each school practiced a different style.

## Funerary Sports and Traditions in Poseidonia:

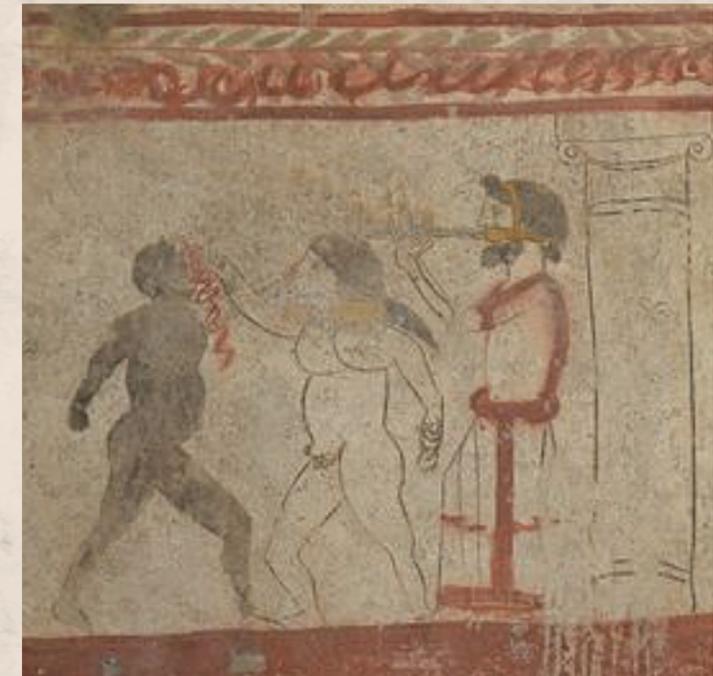
- In Paestan funerary tradition, bloodshed was seen as a sacrifice in honor of the dead.
- Following a procession to the burial site, events such as gladiatorial fighting, boxing, chariot racing, and pankration (a type of wrestling) were performed.
- Music typically accompanied the games and set the tone for the festivity. Wind instruments such as the double aulos, depicted on the right, were played.



Fig. 2 Two pipes of an aulos. Find from the tomb 21, Tempa del Prete necropolis.

## Iconography on the Tufts Tomb Wall:

- (beginning from the left side of the wall)
- The Unknown Figure is possibly a spectator.
- The Judge is a mediator for the match and probably comes from the Greek tradition of a trainer.
- The Aulos Player is a Dionysiac figure who partook in theatrical spectacles. He also mimics the movements of the boxer.
- The Boxers conduct a popular funerary game played in Poseidonia. Note red splotches of blood on the figures. They also boxed in the nude to allow for easier body movement.
- Vegetal and floral motifs are used as decoration and for separating devices. Mediterranean olive branches are visible.



## Conclusions:

- This tomb wall was probably the Northern or Southern wall because the tombs were oriented on an east/west axis. The wall across would have another funerary scene, probably a continuation of boxing or another sport.
- The person who was buried in this tomb was probably noble due to the highly decorative nature of the wall. This tomb was likely located in the Arcioni or Andriuolo necropolis, due to similar iconography and prevalence of boxing scenes there (see above image from Tomb 24 in the Andriuolo Necropolis).
- The scene of boxing could have been chosen because the game actually took place at the funeral or the person was a boxer or simply enjoyed boxing.

