Space in Etruscan Sacred Architecture and Its Implications on Use

Abstract
Space is no doubt an important subject for the Etruscan religion, whether in the inauguration of cities and sacred areas, or in the divination of omens through the Piacenza liver in divided spaces of a sacrificial liver. It is then understandable that in the architecture and layout of the temples and sacred places, the usage of space, bears specific meaning and importance to the use and sanctity of the temple. Exploring the relationship between architectural spaces, and religious and secular use of temple complexes can expand the role of the temple from simply the ritualistic. It can also be shown that temples were both monuments to gods and Etruscans, and that these places were living spaces reflecting the Etruscan sense of spatial relations and importance.

I. Introduction

The Etruscans, in their own rights, were people whose religion was omnipresent in their daily lives. From deciding upon the fate of battle to the inauguration of cities and sacred spaces, the Etruscans held a sense of religion close to themselves. The most prominent part of this religion however, given what is left from the Etruscans, is the emphasis on the use of space.

The division and demarcation of physical space is seen in the orthogonal city plan of Marzabotto with cippus placed at prominent crossroads marking the cardinal directions, to the sixteen parts of the heaven and the sky on the Piacenza liver. Space had been used to divine from lighting, conduct augury from the flight of birds and haruspicy from the liver of sacrificial animals.

Given that the Etruscan religion was deliberate and explicit in its use of space, in the architectural specifications of Etruscan temples space must hold an equally important place.
Thus, temples – houses to gods, and sacred buildings where worship and offerings took place – are no exception to the religious rules of divided spatial relations.\(^1\) As such, temples in their internal space and external orientation within space must be abiding by certain rules and fulfilling certain functions, religious and architectural.

II. Architectural Aspects to the Etruscan Temples

As in all other constructions of Etruria temples were built out of materials readily available to the Etruscans. This meant that the foundation consisted of the local volcanic tufa, with walls of tufa blocks, or clay or mud bricks reinforced with wood, and with structural beams of wood, which had to be protected by clay antefixes and akroterion.\(^2\) These materials meant that the Etruscan temples, unlike their Greek or Roman contemporaries built out of lime and marble, did not make it to the twenty first century in one piece.\(^3\) Foundations of these buildings have survived, with instances such as in Portonaccio temple at Veii, where the akroterion have also been preserved due to ritual burial.

However, the use of perishable materials must not be taken as a detriment to the sanctity of the temple itself. Although grandeur and richness of temples is taken to be a signal for the deep faith of the worshippers – attested by numerous temples archaic and modern – the Etruscan religion might not have dictated it so. After all, the Etruscan religion is a revealed religion, where omens hold an important place. Thus, since no omen has been recorded – or in fact the basic construction material has not changed – it must be the case that the Etruscan gods were content

\(^1\) Edlund-Berry 1994, p. 17
\(^2\) Edlund-Berry 1994, p. 16
\(^3\) Edlund-Berry 1994, p. 17
with their sanctuaries. The case might even be such that gods, living in lodgings of the same material of that of the people might have brought gods closer to the people.

In form the Etruscan temple is built on top of a podium, with – dominantly – frontal instead of peripteral entry and columns. Upon the podium, columns occupy the front half of the podium, and a single cella and dual alae or three cellas form the enclosed temple space in the rear (fig. 1).

The podium, combined with the colonnade in the front, allowed for several different purposes to be fulfilled by providing a raised and large open space within the temple. Firstly, the podium would have provided a vantage point for the augurs and priests to see the sky and the surrounding landmarks, allowing for interpretation of divination. Augurs would have been able to observe the exact flight path of birds, their origins and landing points, and priests would have been able to determine the origin of lighting and the place on which it has landed. Secondly, the podium would have allowed the gods to be placed upon a pedestal, separating them from the level of the people, but not making them unreachable. As such, this sacred space would have been set apart in the eyes of the worshippers and the gods, and would have towered over the surrounding buildings. A third use this raised open space might have had is for a secular use. It cannot be denied that temples – ancient or modern – are also places where people get together, to discuss politics, and trade, as the case would also have been in Etruria. The colonnade on the front of the podium would have provided the Etruscans with a large and shadowed space upon which individuals could talk, under the shadow and protection of the deity housed inside. So, this

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4 Warden 2016, p. 167
5 Colonna 2006, p. 154; Aveni and Romano 1994, p. 552
6 Warden 2016, p. 169
7 Edlund-Berry 1994, p. 19
sacred space would have offered people heavenly security and insurance in their business or political ventures, serving as a crossroads between religious space and secular matters.

As part of this exterior frontal space, the Tuscan columns would have played an important part in creating a large spacious area. In Vitruvius’s proportions of the Tuscan column, “the thickness of the columns at the bottom be one seventh of their height, their height one third of the width of the temple, and the diminution of a column at the top, one fourth of its thickness at the bottom”, which describes a tapering smooth cylindrical column (fig. 2). With assumed figure, for a demonstrative calculation, if the width of the temple is 21 meters – which in six to five ratio puts the length at 25.2 meters – the height of the columns is 7 meters, the base is a meter and the top is 6 meters. Thus, the visual is a frontal colonnade, where smooth and curved columns provided a better view of the temple space at the rear for the outsiders, and a largely unobstructed view of the surrounding area from atop the podium. This style not only would have made religious functions easier to perform, but would also allow for the Etruscans to show to everyone the splendor of their own gods, without hiding the temple behind a curtain of bulky and embellished columns.

Furthering the previous hypothetical calculation, the open front half of the temple would have provided the worshippers and priests with 1852.2 cubic meters of space, not accounting for the columns. Such massive space, not only would have provided a temple with enough place upon its podium for numerous religious and civic activities, but it would have allowed the building to be imposing on and visible from its surroundings. This characteristic would have given the Etruscans a landmark in their city, and given the temple – the dwelling of the god – more prestige, through its increased prominence and visibility.

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8 Vitruvius, 4.7.2-3 as quoted in Boëthius 1962, p. 249
The cella would have served as the room in which the deity dwelled and offering were made to the resident deity. A large space dedicated to a single god – or several gods where three cellas are present – would have been an impressive and imposing space. Filled with votive offerings, and decorative plaques upon its walls, the cella would have allowed for a worshipper to be engulfed by a space that was fully the property of a deity. Thus, the enclosed temple would have formed a space within which the human was in touch with its god. A space, which would have reflected the divinity of the latter, from the immenseness of the space and the offerings dedicated to it. However, in smaller temples, this effect might have been diminished – as it relies heavily on the size of space – yet the votives and religious items within would still have transformed this space into the religious space that it was.

III. Orientation of the Etruscan Temple

Apart from the architectural devices, the orientation of the Etruscan temple within its spatial geography was also important in its religiosity. Compared to their Greek contemporaries, the Etruscan temples did not always face east, but had a variance of east to southwest in orientation. Furthermore, these varied orientations were not the result of human ignorance or mistakes, but were deliberate, to reflect the heavenly lodgings of the gods on the earthen landscape. The Etruscans had, deliberately oriented their temples towards where their gods resided in the heavens and in the process the present environmental structures had been ignored for orientation. Such explicit demands for the temple to be oriented and ordered in a specified

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9 Stevens 2009, p. 153; Aveni and Romano 1994, p. 549; Edlund-Berry 2006, p. 119
10 Aveni and Romano 1994, p. 547; Edlund-Berry 2006, p. 119
11 Aveni and Romano 1994, p. 550
fashion, shows the Etruscan use of space for religious purposes, where it serves as an inviolable rule within the larger planning of the sacred temple space.

The temples however, were not oriented on axes that were randomly selected or set for each god. The guide for orientation was the system of 16 celestial regions found on the Piacenza Liver (fig. 3). However, this information by itself is insufficient to tell why the temples had a rotation in axes. In her work, Stevens proposes a theory, in which the Etruscan sky – and its subsequent depiction on the Piacenza Liver – rotates in accordance with “the summer solstice, the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, and the winter solstice”. This would mean that the orientation of the temple would have had to be in accordance with the moving celestial abodes of the gods. As such, temples not only would not have exactly fixed directions – as in Greece – but would be pointing in not specific but general direction of the gods. As such, temples of Tinia were oriented towards the south, and the temples of Uni were oriented towards the southwest, directed from their positions on the liver.

This orientation would have meant that the augurs and priests divining upon lightning would be given the view of their own gods upon the world. A bond of understanding would be created, where the diviner would have the same perception of the world as the divine. The visual effect would have been compounded with the frontality, where standing on the entrance on the temple one would be given the view of Etruria their gods had, albeit from a lower altitude. Through this visual bond in space, it would have been easier for a priest to orient the divided space before himself in relation to his god, and then conduct divination. A priest of Uni or Apulu, standing on the open front of the podium would be able to easily identify the surrounding sectors of space, and then offer their divinations on the omens. Furthermore, the orientation of

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12 Stevens 2009, p. 159
the temple within its surrounding area, would also determine the space over which the divination was to be conducted. Arguably, temples to gods where one faced east and one faced southwest in the same city would have distinct spaces to divine from, due to their orientations. This would allow for the priests of each god to be able to divine the omens from the god they serve, from a standpoint specific to their own god over the city. Such a relation in space would suggest that the location of the temples within cities were also part of the sanctity that retains to the temple, which, in terms of pleasing the gods, would have been a detail priests looked out for.

IV. Temple of Tinia at Marzabotto, and the Portonaccio Temple at Veii

Marzabotto – orthogonally planned – houses a temple to Tinia, and the temple is not a part of the acropolis but sits at the northern edge of the town, situated between major roads (fig. 4). The temple, deviating from the Etruscan style, has peripteral columns with six on the sides, five at the back and four at the front, with sides measuring 35.5 and 21.9 meters each. However, the temple retains its frontality, as there are stairs leading up to the temple podium only on the southern side. Furthermore, the frontality is the reason why on the southern side the temple has four columns – instead of the irregular five at the back – to allow for the frontality to function properly. Thus, the temple incorporates Greek peripterality without compromising the essential frontality and podium of the Etruscan temple style.

In its orientation, the temple lies at the edge of the city – mapping from the geographic center – and the temple lies in a north-easterly sector of the city, corresponding to the location of Tinia on the Piacenza liver (fig. 5). Furthermore, the temple is oriented on a north-south line,
which is not only in line with the orthogonal plan of Marzabotto, but also conforms to Tinia’s orientation towards south on the Piacenza Liver.\textsuperscript{16} Though the spatial orientation of the temple can be taken as an imposition of the orthogonal plan on building requirements, the fact that it is not located within the acropolis suggests otherwise. A conscious choice must have been made by the priests in designating the space for this temple to move it to a different part of the city. A choice to locate the temple where not only its placement relative to the city, but relative to the cardinal points of the sky associated with Tinia.

This choice of location must have allowed for the temple to conform both to the religious requirements of spatial relations, but also made the work of priests and haruspices easier to perform. Since the temple would be oriented in Tinia’s vision of the world, a priest standing upon the southern side of the podium would be able to divine from a standpoint from which Tinia himself would also be acting from. Lightning or bird flock coming in from the north upon Marzabotto would be seen and divined by a priest at the temple. As such, the act of divination would not have required a priest to use an aid like the Piacenza Liver, or travel to parts of Marzabotto to see the omens to understand their nature or targets.

The Portonaccio Temple of Veii is a square plan temple, 18.5 meters on each side, and has three cellas where although the mainly worshipped deity is Apulu (the Greek Apollo), but Menrva was also seemingly worshipped here.\textsuperscript{17} Contrary to the stylistic deviance from the Etruscan temple design in the temple of Tinia in Marzabotto, the three cellas of Portonaccio occupy the back half of the temple, and the front half is open with only two columns and frontality (\textit{fig. 6}).\textsuperscript{18} Thus, the Portonaccio temple conformed fully to the possible uses of the

\textsuperscript{16} Sassatelli and Govi 2008, p. 30; Stevens 2009, p. 161
\textsuperscript{17} Stevens 2009, p. 161; Colonna 2006, p. 156; Haynes 2000, p. 205
\textsuperscript{18} Colonna 2006, p. 156; Haynes 2000, p. 206
temple space in its architectural form, whereas in Marzabotto the incorporation of peripterality has been added which possibly diluted the function of the space at the front of the temple.

In orientation, the Portonaccio temple – similar to the case in Marzabotto – is located outside the walls of the ancient city of Veii, in the northwestern side of the plateau on which Veii was established (fig. 7).\(^\text{19}\) This is a difference from Marzabotto, but it must be kept in mind that Apulu does not appear in name on the Piacenza Liver. As such, it cannot be expected that when space was inaugurated for the temple to be established upon, that the augurs would be conforming to the rule of spatial relativity to the city of Veii. However, the temple is built upon a west-east or northwest-southeast axis, with the frontality facing east or southeast, and the direction can be associated with Tecvm who can be tied to Apulu.\(^\text{20}\) Thus, whilst the process of inaugurating space for the temple could not have relied on the Piacenza Liver for guidance, its orientation could have relied on it. As such, although the temple would not be in a position, relative to the city, that was especially sacred as can be seen by the Piacenza Liver, it could still perform its religious function fully as it was oriented to the seat of Apulu in the heavens.

In contrast with Marzabotto, the Portonaccio temple is located outside of the walls of Veii, which means that the orientation of the temple could not have been a result of city planning. Thus, the orientation appears as a conscious and deliberate choice on the part of the priests and augurs. Moreover, while the temple at Marzabotto was at a vantage point relative to the city, the Portonaccio temple was on level footing with the city and most likely had the walls to block its view of the city. Alas, this would mean that the hypothesis that the open frontal space was used in divination to survey the city would prove improbable in the case of Portonaccio. However, in the orientation and construction of Etruscan temples environmental or manmade

\(^{19}\) Haynes 2000, p. 205
\(^{20}\) Stevens 2009, p. 161
concerns were disregarded for religious rules. Considering this fact, a situation in which the temple might have an obstructed view of the city, should have been no detriment to the sanctity of the temple space.

A further point of difference is that in Marzabotto the temple of Tinia is seated to look from the seat of Tinia southward. However, in Portonaccio the temple of Apulu looks towards the seat of Apulu eastwards, and is situated in the west. This is quite a deviation from the idea that the orientation was deliberate to give the priest a view of the city, which is identical to that of his god to help in divination. However, since the difference is 180 degrees – between two opposite cardinal points – the change might have been an acceptable deviance from the religious norm. Given that the reason for orientation to correspond with heavenly seats was to facilitate divination, this deviation might have been justified with the need to give the temple a view of the city for divination. Instead of having a temple on the eastern or southeastern edge of Veii, that looked east, would have meant that the priest would have to divine based on an open landscape. However, a temple on the western or northwestern edge of Veii, looking east would have allowed the priests to divine while overlooking the city, as omens retaining to the *mechl rasnal* of Veii would not have been in context otherwise.

V. Conclusion

As can be supported by archaeological evidence, the Etruscan religion attached great significance to how interactions occurred in space. Cities and sanctuaries were inaugurated; the flight origins and paths of birds and the origin, direction, and target or lightning were divined. All these religious activities required knowledge of divine and earthly space, and the manmade temples in which augury and lightning divination took place abided by this knowledge of space.
Moreover, this spatial knowledge did not only result in an arbitrarily created heaven, and a set of related rituals and omen divination techniques. Spatial relations was not only an essential part of religious life but also that of the Etruscan architecture, and city planning with regards to religious space. Space determined the placement, orientation, architectural style and ultimately the functions of the temple space in Etruscan cities.
Bibliography


Vitruvius, *de Arhcitectura*, 4.7.2-3

Fig. 1: The ground plan and projection for an Etruscan temple built in the three cella style, found in the Portonaccio Temple of Veii or the Temple of Jupiter in Rome (University of Washington, http://courses.washington.edu/rome250/gallery/archaicimages/web_DrawingEtruscanTemple.jpg)

Fig. 2: The Tuscan order of column, shown alongside the other orders of columns. (Cengage, http://www.cengage.com/art/book_content/0495094870_lazzari/study_guide/ch02.html)
Fig. 3: The Piacenza Liver (AJA Online, https://www.ajaonline.org/article/279)

**Veduta dell’area del tempio**

*Fig. 4: Aerial photograph of the ground plan of the temple of Tinia at Marzabotto (Montesole, http://www.montesole.eu/cms/templi/42-il-nuovo-tempio-urbano-di-tinia.html)*
Fig. 5: Temple of Tinia at Marzabotto and the ground plan of Marzabotto, the temple is marked with number 2. (Nauticlub11, http://www.nauticlub11.com/HN-XXIV-1-Kainua.htm)

Fig. 6: Ground plan of the Portonaccio temple at Veii, the temple itself is marked by the letter A. (University of Oklahoma, http://www.ou.edu/class/ahi4163/files/arch2.html)
Fig. 7: Map of Veii marking the position of the Portonaccio temple, relative to the city. The temple is marked with number 3. (Class Connection, https://classconnection.s3.amazonaws.com/1883/flashcards/392461/png/map-of-veii.png)