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Seianti Hanunia Tlesnasa: The Story of an Etruscan Noblewoman (British Museum Research Publication)

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The magnificent painted terracotta sarcophagus of the Etruscan noblewoman Seianti Hanunia Tlesnasa has for well over a century been a star exhibit at the British Museum, but it is only in relatively recent times that attention has turned to the skeleton found within, which appears to be the best preserved Etruscan skeleton now in existence. The initial aim of the research was to reconstruct the face of Seianti using the techniques of forensic medicine, in order to compare it with that of the reclining, full-sized image of the dead woman on the sarcophagus lid. This already yielded striking information about the Etruscans as the initiators of realistic portraiture - we believe this to be the first proven identifiable portrait in western art. Other avenues opened up allowing the researchers to discover fascinating facts about Seianti's health and dental problems, her lifestyle, her age at death, and an accident in her teens that had far-reaching consequences. The pathologist's findings have offered evidence for Etruscan mortuary practices hitherto unparalleled. Consideration of the silver tomb goods, the jewellery worn by Seianti and the radiocarbon dating of the bones has indicated a dating of the burial earlier in the Hellenistic period than previously accepted. The construction of the sarcophagus itself, a remarkable feat of firing, and the techniques of its decoration form the subject of other papers, while the circumstances of the find in 1876, the archaeology and evidence about the Seiante family are discussed in detail. A brief survey of the Etruscans and events contemporary with Seianti's lifetime help to set the burial in its ancient context.

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