The Ridgway Ram Vase

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In 2008 an unusual and charming early Etruscan vase appeared on the Freiburg market.1 It was decided to purchase it in memory of another distinguished female Etruscologist, Dr Francesca Romana Sierra Ridgway, who had sadly died in March that year, and to publish it briefly in this very Etruscan volume in honour of a very good friend of hers.

The vase is a small oinochoe (ht. 16.5cm) with a spout in the form of a ram’s head (Fig. 1). The ram’s horns have been added in relief, emanating from a raised nose line, and there is a ridge at the top of the head with five points, presumably intended to suggest the animal’s woolly fleece. Seven holes have been pierced in the end of the muzzle to act as a sieve or filter. The neck is decorated with bands and a row of tiny silhouette birds, with a horizontal wavy line at the base, either suggesting water, or a snake. There is a plastic ridge between the neck and the body. The main decoration of the body takes the form of a series of metopal panels – three silhouette horses and three butterfly patterns, separated by two vertical lines. At the back, under the root of the twin-reeded handle there is a further form that looks very much like the head of a griffin with open mouth and protruding tongue. The style of painting recalls some of the minor pieces of Italo-Geometric and Early Orientalising pottery, dating to the early 7th century, such as the miniature dinos in the British Museum decorated with silhouette goats.2

The elaborate spout with its ram’s head and the plastic ring at the base of the neck probably point to influence from metal vessels, a phenomenon to be found in the pottery of several ancient Mediterranean cultures. Of special relevance here is a number of Phoenician bronze oinochoai with animal heads from the western Mediterranean, in particular Iberia, dating from the 7th century into the 6th.3 They all, however, have a conical-shaped neck, making them rather pear-like, and very small animal-head spouts (lion and stag) that have replaced the normal small trefoil mouth. A related Etruscan example preserved in the Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire in Brussels, once in the collection of Alessandro François (1796–1857), would seem to be of 7th-century date (Fig. 2).4 Like the new ram-headed vase, however, it has, in addition to a plastic ring at the base of the neck, a far less conical neck and a rather more rounded body than the Phoenician vessels.

When we turn to pottery, we find a contemporary, but rather larger, Etruscan impasto oinochoe in the Louvre (ex Campana) that is not only closely connected with the Phoenician bronze oinochoai by reason of its conical neck, but is also the closest parallel for the spout of our new vase (Fig. 3a,b,c).5 It has a very similarly shaped ram’s head spout, complete with sieve (four holes), although the tips of the horns are more prominent and the woolly fringe behind slightly less elaborate (three projections instead of five). This remarkable impasto vase has been given a reddish brown, rather streaky slip that might, in this case, be the result of a wish to imitate a Phoenician pottery vessel or even a metal one, if the reddish slip was intended to suggest uncorroded bronze. Etruscan bucchero potters also attempted both single and double animal-head spouts on some of their more adventurous vessels and, indeed, a fragment of a ram’s-head spout was found in the Regolini-Galassi Tomb.6 At the other end of the Mediterranean, Cypriot potters, too, turned the spouts of some of their pottery jugs into animal heads and one, a black-on-red ware jug in the Israel Museum in Tel Aviv, is also in the form of a ram’s head, although much more naturalistically rendered.8 In both the Etruscan and Cypriot cases it seems most likely that the inspiration came from the Phoenician world, with the Etruscans perhaps looking to the western Phoenician ambit, rather than the eastern.9

It is normally assumed that such bronze vessels with animal head spouts, and their ceramic imitations (although the current may have flowed in both directions), were prestige objects and that the ram signified male potency.10 Both readings are very likely true, but it is worth considering the possible Phoenician context of the Ridgway and Louvre jugs a little further and the idea that the choice of the animal head was more than a purely decorative one. Éric Gubel has recently argued that the Phoenicians adopted the ram-headed or ‘Khnum’ sceptre from Egypt and that it was used in conjunction with an oinochoe, perhaps filled with oil from the Sacred Tree, in a ceremony designed to bestow the ‘breath of life’.11 Furthermore, William Culican stressed some years ago the important rôle of the metal jug in Punic ritual, noting that on scores of third-second century stelai the dead is represented as an adorant, holding a box of incense and a jug. Many of these jugs are fluted, have high flung handles and mouths in the shape of rams’ heads. They were obviously standard liturgical requirements.…12

Is it possible, therefore, that the Etruscan pottery ram-headed vases imitated Phoenician metal oinochoai with ram’s head spouts that deliberately combined into one object an animal headed sceptre and a libation jug?13 Such a vessel might have been intended to symbolise the ritual, whether in life, death or the after-life. How much such a Phoenician ritual was known, understood or practised in Etruria is, of course, very difficult to assess, although there are suggestions that either might have been possible.14 That a similar ritual practice might have occurred on Cyprus could hardly be doubted given the presence of Phoenician cults on that island.15

The Ridgway Ram Vase may thus represent an intriguing result of cultural hybridity, created in a ‘Middle Ground’, whether metaphorical or physical, in southern Etruria in the early 7th century.16 It is essentially an Etruscan product that carries the strong imprint of a Greek pottery tradition (initially Euboean), with an overlay of a Phoenician toretic tradition.
Figure 1. Ridgway Ram Vase, ht. 16.5cm. British Museum, GR 2008,5002.1
Figure 2 Bronze oinochoe, ht. 18cm. Brussels, Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire, inv. R 1170

Figure 3a Impasto oinochoe, ht. 25.4cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, C 711, photo RMN, Maurice et Pierre Chuzeville

Figure 3b,c Impasto oinochoe, ht. 25.4cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, C 711, photo Maurice et Pierre Chuzeville
and perhaps even the knowledge of a Phoenician cultic ritual function. It was presumably placed in the tomb of an Etruscan and may thus have carried a related message to the similar jug represented on the later Punic stele. In southern Etruria the inhabitants were clearly open to both Greek and Phoenician ideas, perhaps first through the corridor of Campania but very soon directly, so that the adoption and adaptation of deities, mythical heroes and religious rituals, as well as, of course, new technologies including the alphabet, were frequent, thus leading to considerable cultural accommodation and change.

Notes
1. London, British Museum, GR 2008,5002. 1. Formerly in the collection of Professor U. Föll, Stuttgart: Kunst der Antike – Ancient Art, Galerie Günther Puhez, Katalog 22, 2008, no. 96. I should like to thank Éric Gubel for his kind and enthusiastic help on matters Phoenician, Cécile Evers and Natacha Massar for their help with the Brussels bronze oinochoe, François Gautier for her help with the Louvre impasto oinochoe, Judith Swaddling for her sympathetic encouragement and Josephine Turquet for her amazing patience.
2. I am very grateful to Dr Judith Swaddling for this suggestion.
5. Gubel E. 2001, 'The breath of life or the riddle of the ram-headed sceptre', Archaeology & History in Lebanon 13, 35–44.

Bibliography
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