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Reviewed Article:

Wives, Queens, Goddesses: Reconstructing the Outfit of a 8th-7th Century BC Picenian Woman

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The present work is a reconstruction which was made with two objectives in mind. The first was to experiment with heat-treating of amber, a technique already hypothesised by Von Eles (1995), in order to verify possible resin alteration due to heating. Although already tried in the past (Fiorentini, 2018b) after having conducted some cold-working experiments (Fiorentini, 2018a), some of the amber jewels shown represent the first successful examples of hot-working with amber. The second objective was to give the public a hypothetical

representation of Picenian female dress in 8th-7th Century BC, in order to complement the Picenian warrior figure (Fiorentini, 2013), therefore showing the public the differences between the two.



Every replica of the following accessories has been based on originals found in various archaeological sites between Marche and Abruzzo, and reproduced in a manner which attempts to use techniques and tools as similar as possible to those possibly used for the context considered here.

Introduction

The Iron Age in Central Italy is a period that runs approximately from the 9th to the 3rd centuries BC, generally beginning with the late Villanovan culture and ending with the Romanisation of entire regions and cultures. Among those cultures there existed one which populated the modern-day regions of Marche and Abruzzo: the so-called Picenian culture, of which the author already wrote in both EXARC (Fiorentini, 2013; 2018b) and Edizioni Chillemi (Fiorentini, 2018a).

The Picenian culture lasted for almost seven centuries and continuously evolved during its lifetime, being influenced by the Greek and Etruscan cultures, influences that defined a whole period of this Italic culture (Torelli, 2000). This is called the “Orientalising period” or, more scientifically, the “Piceno III”, a period of time that spans from 700 to 580 BC according to Delia G. Lollini’s analysis and other authors’ contributions (Lollini, 1972; Regione Marche, 1992; Colonna, et al., 1999).

Analysing the actual level of studies on Picenian culture, it has been possible to define some characteristics concerning both appearance and armament of Picenian Warriors (Fiorentini, 2011; 2013; 2018a; 2018b). The present text joins those previous studies, representing a new analysis focused on what could have been the typical female dress of a Picenian woman who lived between the 8th and 7th century BC, at the very beginning phase of the “Orientalising era”.

Every replica of the following accessories has been based on originals found in various archaeological sites between Marche and Abruzzo, and reproduced in a manner which attempts to use techniques and tools as similar as possible to those possibly used for the context considered here. The dress itself is an exception to this rule, being an industrial product made out of cotton, a material that was not available to the Picenians. However, it is only used as a background in order to give a wider impression of how the accessories might have looked when worn. Thus, the dress should not be considered as a reproduction of any kind.

As a huge amount of archaeological data confirms (Lollini, 1972; Regione Marche, 1992; Baldelli, 2001; Bergonzi, 2001; Baldelli, 2008a; 2008b; Coen and Sabbatini, 2008), female burials were often very rich, replete with funerary equipment such as pottery, tools for

banquets, weaving and numerous kinds of personal ornamentation, either in precious materials (such as bronze and glass) or exotic ones (such as amber or Cyprea shells). That is why we have tried to offer the public a global insight of the 8th-7th century Picenian female appearance.

Replicas

The most flamboyant piece is, nevertheless, the **bronze laminated pectoral**, which shows fretwork decoration and is embellished with seven Cyprea shells (See Figure 2a). The shells indicate the commercial operations the Picenian were involved with, having been imported from as far as the Indian Ocean (Landolfi, 2005). The original pectoral was found in the Ascoli Piceno territory and is currently exhibited at the Archaeological Museum of this town, taken from the Civic Collection.

The fretwork decoration shows two opposing quadrupeds which have not been clearly identified yet (maybe felines or fantastic animals), each posing with one of its front paws on a spoked wheel (See Figure 2b). Seven Cyprea shells are attached to the bronze plate with seven hooks made of twisted bronze wire. The symbolism expressed by this object has not been clearly deciphered yet, but regarding the Cyprea shell, an interpretation linked to women's fertility has been proposed (Landolfi, 2005). Associating such interpretation to that of renewal that can be given to the wheel figure, we can guess that the pectoral was bearing a deep symbolic meaning closely related to femininity.

The replica has been fabricated by shaping a bronze plate with a hacksaw and drilling it with a hand drill, both tools whose existence in Picenian context has been guessed at (Lucentini, Silvestrini and de Marinis, 2001, pp.46-47). Even the shells have been hand-drilled, while the bronze hooks have been created by using some round sections of wire, twisting and bending them after heating to take on proper shape.

Making the bronze plate took six days of work, from the blank plate to the finished one, making a total of about thirty work hours. Piercing the shells involved a lot less effort, taking only a few minutes with a hand drill, and hot-working and twisting the bronze wire was simple as well.

It is useful to note that numerous hacksaw blades broke while doing the fretwork, due to the intense use. Such a high consumption, hardly acceptable in an ancient context where smith's tools were so precious and treasured. This gives us many interesting inputs for future research on both ancient fretwork technology and the validity of the method applied to this reconstruction.

Jewellery embellished with amber, such as two fibulae, a couple of earrings, an amulet and a necklace, represents another typology of quite interesting pieces, amber being another exotic

material which was imported from the Baltic Sea (Lewanski and Kanceff, 1995).

Both **fibulae** are of the “simple bow” kind, made from bronze. The simplest one (See Figure 3, the specimen on right) is decorated with a Baltic amber core, which is pierced in the middle so that it can hold the fibula’s bow, as seen in many finds (Gobbi, in Franche dell’Orto, 2001, pp.201-202; Biocco, 2008, pp.67-72; Bergonzi and Ritrecina, 2010, pp.9, 43). Another example of this kind of fibula is that with wooden spacers on either side of the amber core (Fiorentini, 2018a, pp.18-19; see Figures 5a and 5b) to which either spacer is joined with a couple of internal metal pins.

The most difficult fibula to replicate was an example decorated by alternating discs of amber and bone (See Figure 3, specimen on left). It is a replica of originals found in Matelica (Biocco, 2008, pp.69-70; see Figure 8). It was created by firstly shaping discs out of bone and amber plates, then piercing them to host the metal wire, before finally mounting them onto the fibula. By using this method we obtained a compact core which had been polished and refined until it obtained the desired shape.

The tools used to work all of these materials included a hacksaw, a hand drill, a small hammer and files of different sizes. During this reconstruction, which took about six hours, it was interesting to note how bronze was the hardest material, amber the weakest and bone was right in between the two.

This difference within one artefact meant that we had to adopt a different approach and level of care in working with each material. As an example, we had to use an iron file to polish the bone, but a light whetstone accomplished the desired finish on the amber without fear of breaking it.

The most critical moment in the manufacture of the fibula with the amber core, apart from piercing the amber, was making the metal spring. This was because the bronze wire had to be heated prior to being twisted around an iron pin, in order to create the spring’s whorl, but other materials susceptible to heat (that is, amber, wood or bone) were already assembled on it.

This was the phase when the utmost care was taken to preserve the amber, wood and bone from the heat, in order to avoid the risk of burning them or, worse, to destroy accidentally the entire artefact.

It was a very stressful and critical process, and it is desirable to conduct further experiments in the future to better understand how it was possible to heat the bronze without burning other materials, while using an Iron Age forge.

Three other objects have been made out of amber, including a couple of **earrings**, a **necklace** composed of numerous small beads and a **spherical pendant** (See Figure 1).

Each earring comprises of an irregular amber disc of 2.5 cm in diameter, which has been pierced in the middle. A curved bronze wire has been made to pass through the hole, its ends overlapped in order to create a closed circle (See Figure 7 and main image).

Earrings such as these were widespread between the 8th and the 5th centuries (Lucentini, in Franche dell'Orto, 2001, p.259) although both the size and the shape of the amber discs could vary, ranging from 1.9 to at least 6 cm in diameter, and from irregular shapes like the one reproduced here to more precision- carved ones. Starting from the second half of the 6th century, the bronze wire was sometimes replaced by an iron one.

The necklace is based on finds from Verucchio (Von Eles, 2010, pp.183, 193), Novilara (Cardone, 2001, p.13) and Matelica (Biocco, 2008, p.67; Sabbatini, 2008, pp.59-60; see Figure 9), and is composed of some 120 amber beads of irregular shape, pierced to host a wire of vegetal origins.

The pendant is made of a single amber core that has been worked by removing material in order to give it a spherical shape (See Figure 4, bottom of image). It presents an upper trapezoidal hold from which it is suspended. It is modelled on an original found in Matelica (Biocco, 2008, pp.70-71), although it is smaller in size. Making this pendant posed interesting challenges, for the hot-working hypothesised in Von Eles (1995) was turned into actual experimentation. After heating a knife blade to a red-hot cherry red shade, it was then used to cut through the amber core, removing material as if it was wax. This heated blade resulted in remarkable precision and ease of cutting which helped shape the core to a sphere, with a continuous curved surface.

This first hot-worked pendant confirms the possibility that such a technique can shape the amber without altering its internal structure, as feared by Von Eles (1995).

This is the first successful experiment of its kind and many more are planned in the future, to verify if the same can be said in case of piercing or emptying the amber jewel using incandescent tools. The research in this field is still at a very early phase.

The **final fibula** reproduced is the bronze one, shaped as a simple twisted bow. Two typical Picenian instruments are attached to the pin of this fibula - a tiny **bronze comb** and a **nail cleaner** (See Figure 6a).

The bronze comb was made by cutting a bronze plate, then decorating it using an iron awl to recreate both the linear and the circular motifs. The original find was retrieved in Fossa (D'Ercole and Cosentino, in Franche dell'Orto, 2001, p.204), while the suspension system was modelled on another find from Fossa (D'Ercole and Cosentino, in Franche dell'Orto, 2001, p.205), which included a similar comb attached to a bracelet through a metal chain. These two finds have been dated to the 9th century BC, which is slightly more recent than an exceptional wooden comb of similar shape and size found in Celano (Cosentino, in Franche

dell'Orto, 2001, pp.183-184). It is interesting to note that all these combs have been found in both male and female graves alike, showing universal use of this kind of object.

The nail cleaner (See Figure 6b) is modelled on a series of finds which are quite different from one from another in terms of size and decorations, but are all similar in the main characteristics, that one end is shaped as a swallow's tail and that there is a file in the middle. Many of these tools have been found in Novilara (Cardone, 2001, pp.29, 35; Gobbi, in Franche dell'Orto, 2001, p.202) and also in nearby Emilia-Romagna (Von Eles, 1985), pretty much all dating to the 7th century BC. These are multi-functional objects, for the swallow's tail terminal is supposed to have been used to cut nails while its central parallel grooves may have been used as a file on the nails.

As a side note, it is interesting to acknowledge the occasional presence of two more tools along with the comb and nail cleaner: tiny tweezers made of a bent rod of bronze or iron, and the so-called ear cleaners, metallic tools that are similar to the nail cleaners but identified as ear cleaners due to the presence of a tiny spoon on one end instead of the swallow tail.

The last piece of equipment shown here is the **belt**, or leather stole. It represents an object which is well attested in the early Iron Age Picenian period, with finds in the 8th century BC female graves of Porto Sant'Elpidio's Pian di Torre (Bergonzi and Ritrecina, 2010, pp. 29, 32-35), in 9th and 8th century female graves of Matelica (Baldelli, 2008a, p.63; Biocco, 2008, p.66; Sabbatini, 2008, pp.58-60) and in others, such as in Numana and Moje di Pollenza (Sabbatini, 2008, p.58).

This is the reason why it was decided to recreate it, by cutting a long, rectangular leather strap, on which 98 bronze nails have been attached, similar to those found in Pian di Torre's A 6 grave. The belt can be closed by inserting a bronze hook attached to one of its ends in the holes pierced on the other end. This bronze hook replicates the one found in Matelica's 108 grave, where it has been found in association with the surviving nails of its belt.

Some Reflections

This has been an attempt to give a preliminary idea of how a Picenian woman that lived shortly before the Orientalising era (between the 8th and the 7th century BC) could have dressed.

The aim was primarily to recreate the richness and the beauty that archaeological finds suggest were regular features of Picenian women's apparel. Due to many extremely rich artefacts in some Picenian female burials, some of the women have been identified as social elite and likely leaders, reminding us of the complex social structure of the culture. This is also why the results shown here may be spectacular in some aspects (due to the presence of precious materials and the far-flung origins of the exotic ones), but also in their level of detail. It cannot be denied that the rich abundance of grave goods in female graves easily match that

of their male counterparts.

The goods of ten graves were used as templates for the objects reproduced in this study.

Two of these, Matelica's tombs 108 and 18, are the most lavish, presenting numerous amber core fibulae together with composite ones as well as the original of the belt with bronze studs (Baldelli, 2008a, pp.63-65; Biocco, 2008, pp.65-72; Sabbatini, 2008, pp.57-60). Verucchio's tomb 24 is perhaps even richer, with funerary equipment including a couple of amber earrings, an amber necklace and at least eleven fibulae with either a plain amber core or a composite bone/amber core (Von Eles, 2010, pp.181-187).

Fibulae with amber cores have also been found in Novilara's tombs 135 and 119, along with a nail cleaner in the latter. This object has been found also in Novilara's tomb X, while an ear cleaner has been found in Novilara's tomb 38. However, neither of these last two tombs such objects were associated with amber jewellery of any kind (Gobbi, in Franche dell'Orto, 2001, pp.201-202).

Fossa's tomb 57 has instead produced a bronze comb associated with an amber necklace and two composite bone and amber fibulae, while another bronze comb was found in Fossa's tomb 11, and a wooden one in Celano's tomb 4, again, these were not associated with amber jewels (Cosentino, in Franche dell'Orto, 2001, pp.183-184; D'Ercole and Cosentino, in Franche dell'Orto, 2001, pp.203-205).

The brief details of the tombs given here allows us at least to highlight a good variability in terms of richness of the ancient funerary equipment, variability that was due to diverse reasons such as the social status of the buried, change in fashions and such.

By commencing an analysis of these ten tombs, we can start to frame the reconstructed female dress as typical of the North-Western area of the Marche region, during the 8th-7th Century BC, but also demonstrating some more ancient influences from the South (the 9th Century bronze comb from the Abruzzo region).

Conclusions

This preliminary reconstruction reflects a good approximation of some of the characteristics of the Picenian female dress of that time.

Indeed, during the research prior to the reconstructions, it was noted that some objects could be found in some graves that have reliable regional chronologies, but not in others. The most obvious case being that of some huge bronze rings decorated with knots, which are only found in some female graves in Cupra Marittima. This suggests they were used to define a dress code typical of some parts of the region and not others. This can still be seen nowadays, during typical traditional feasts where local female clothing is different depending on where the feast is being held.

For all these reasons the next steps that are planned entail a strong research focus on a smaller geographical and chronological context, in order to further lend detail to the research and its eventual results. This present text is therefore to be considered as the starting point for further, more specific studies.

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🔖 Keywords **jewellery**
bronze
amber

🔖 Country Italy

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| Gallery Image



FIG 1. RECONSTRUCTION OF A PICENIAN PRINCESS, 8TH-7TH C. BC. COPYRIGHT: M. FIORENTINI



FIG 2A. BRONZE PECTORAL WITH CYPREA SHELLS. COPYRIGHT: M. FIORENTINI



FIG 2B. CLOSE VIEW ON THE FRETWORK OF THE BRONZE PECTORAL. COPYRIGHT: M. FIORENTINI



FIG 3. LEFT, BRONZE FIBULA DECORATED WITH BONE AND AMBER DISCS. RIGHT, BRONZE FIBULA DECORATED WITH AN AMBER CORE. COPYRIGHT: M. FIORENTINI



FIG 4. SOME EXAMPLES OF IRON AGE AMBER PENDANTS. BOTTOM LEFT IS THE AMBER PENDANT WORN BY THE PICENIAN PRINCESS. COPYRIGHT: M. FIORENTINI



FIG 5A. BRONZE FIBULA DECORATED WITH AN AMBER CORE BETWEEN TWO WOODEN SPACERS. COPYRIGHT: M. FIORENTINI



FIG 5B. CLOSE VIEW ON THE FIBULA. INNER METAL PINS SECURING THE AMBER CORE TO THE SPACERS ARE VISIBLE IN BACKLIGHT. COPYRIGHT: M. FIORENTINI



FIG 6A. A PORTABLE PICENIAN TOILET SET IS MADE OF A BRONZE COMB AND A BRONZE NAIL CLEANER HANGING FROM A BRONZE FIBULA. COPYRIGHT: M. FIORENTINI



FIG 6B. CLOSE VIEW ON THE NAIL CLEANER, SHOWING ITS SWALLOW'S TAIL AND THE FILE. COPYRIGHT: M. FIORENTINI



FIG 7. COUPLE OF BRONZE EARRINGS DECORATED WITH AMBER DISCS. COPYRIGHT: M. FIORENTINI

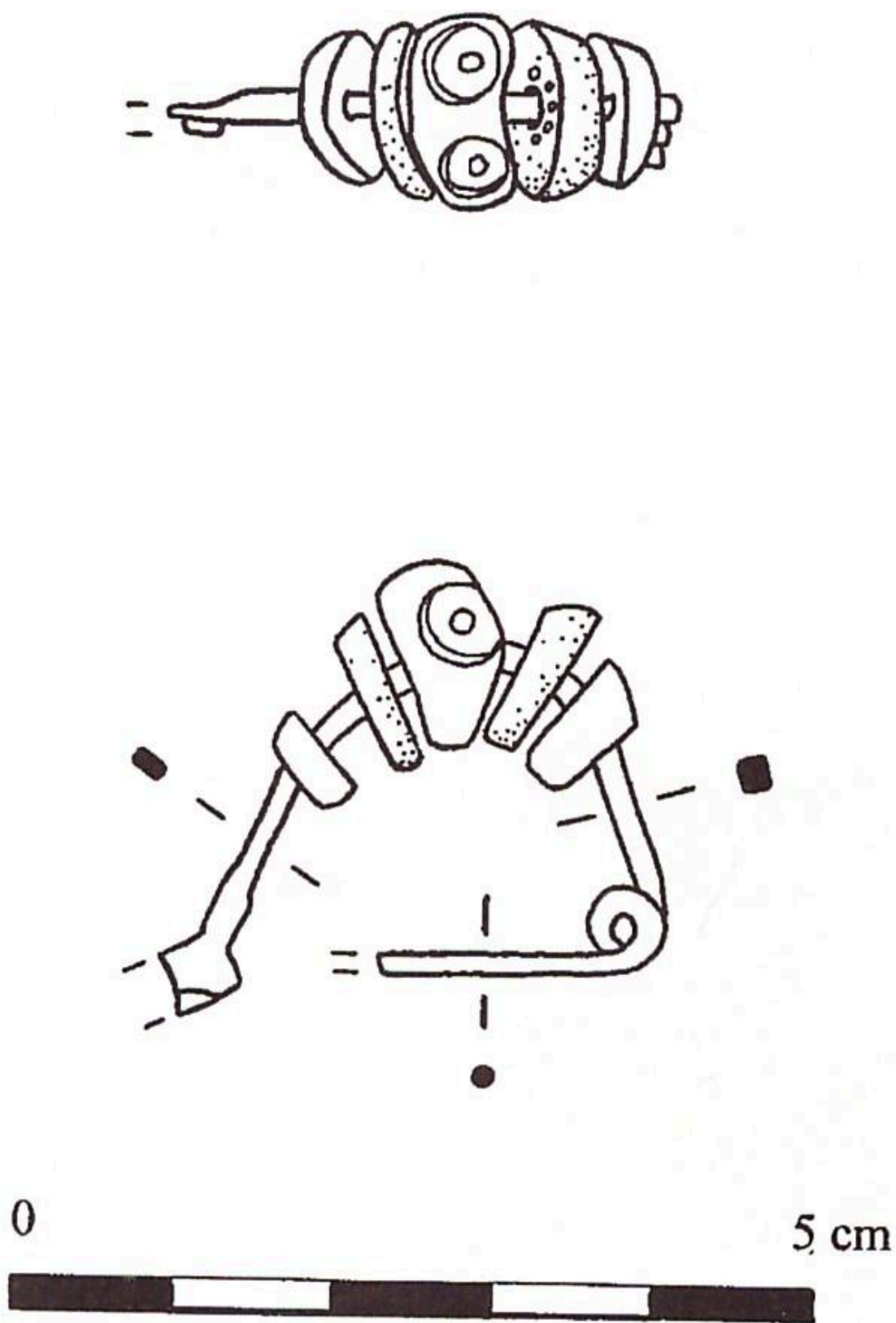


FIG 8. ORIGINAL FINDS. FROM BIOCCO 2008, 'POTERE E SPLENDORE', TORINO, PAGE 69, CATALOGUE 41



FIG 9. ORIGINAL FINDS. FROM SABBATINI 2008, 'POTERE E SPLENDORE', TORINO, PAGE 60, CATALOGUE 6