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TANAQUIL OF TARQUINII

It is impossible to give a full account of the mythological events of the epoch of the ancient Roman kings without giving due attention to the personality of Gaia Caecilia Tanaquil, the wife of Tarquinius Priscus, the fifth king of Rome.

It is for this reason that numerous authors of the ancient period, including Livy, Dionysus of Halicarnassus, Plutarch, Pliny the Elder, Pontius Paulinus, Ausonius and Claudianus provide information about Tanaquil.

According to Livy, Tanaquil belonged to the highest strata of society (*summo loco nata*)¹ of the city of Tarquinii, Etruria. By contrast, her husband, Lucumo (later Lucius Tarquinius Priscus) was the son of Demaratus, who had emigrated from Corinth to Tarquinii. By marrying him, Tanaquil moved down the social hierarchy. The reason for this is perhaps to be sought in the distinctly conservative nature of the Etruscan society - foreigners never became equal with the indigenous population.

It may be that had it not been for Tanaquil's ambition, Lucumo, a rather wealthy person, would have ended his life in Tarquinii in tranquility and contentment but Tanaquil 'could not reconcile herself to the idea that with this marriage her status fell to a level lower than what was her birth-right². Apart from this, she could not reconcile herself to humiliation. Therefore, disowning her natural love for her homeland, she decided to leave Tarquinii to make sure her husband gained glory.'³

¹ Livius, *Ab urbe condita*, Libri I, 34, 4.

² Livius, *op. cit.*, I, 34, 5.

³ Livius, *op. cit.*, I, 34, 7.

According to Livy, Tanaquil's decision was not spontaneous or impulsive. She (not Lucumo) analyzed the situation well and carefully chose a place for resettlement - Rome, where nobility was being formed on the basis of personal rather than ancestral merits at that time.

Tanaquil easily persuaded her husband to leave their homeland and they both moved to Rome with all of their property. The energetic woman kept untiringly encouraging her husband to struggle, constantly inspiring him into believing that he had an exceptional destiny blessed by the gods.

For example, when the husband and wife suddenly encounter an eagle on their way to Rome and the eagle snatches Lucumo's hat away, flies away screeching loudly, then descends and places the hat back on the man's hat, 'Tanaquil, like a true Etruscan, well versed in the art of prophecy, embraces her husband and commands him to believe in his high and grand destiny' (1, 34, 9-10).

Even though Livy says nothing about Tanaquil's specific role in the political life of Lucumo, later known as Lucius Tarquinius Priscus, it is beyond doubt that the woman from Tarquini would continue providing her husband with counsel in his efforts to win over ordinary Roman citizens through generous presents and charity, or when he attended assemblies and sessions at the royal court.

As a result of all this, the Tarquinius couple progressed further on the way to their goal - King Ancus liked the polite, generous and ever obliging foreigner and appointed him guardian of his children.

After Ancus' death, Tarquinius engages in a decisive struggle for the throne. Concerned with the princes' approaching coming of age, he sends them away on a hunting trip and convenes a popular session - he was the first among the Roman kings to request the throne, a request whose legitimacy he backed up with a speech prepared specially for the occasion. Tarquinius Priscus easily obtained the people's consent and was elected king.

As we said above, it is clear that Tanaquil would not limit herself to the role of a simple observer of these events - the woman who took the unilateral and important decision to resettle her family in Rome would be actively engaged in her husband's election as king.

Nor did Tanaquil retreat to the kitchen, to use a relative term, after her husband's enthronement. Not a single important event at the royal court takes place without Tanaquil's participation.

For example, when she sees a strange light standing above the head of her woman-servant's son, she orders her family members to wait till the boy wakes up. Employing her usual art of interpreting signs she tells her husband that Servius Tullius - for such was the sleeping boy's name -

should be given a proper education because glory awaits him in the future.

Tanaquil believes that it will be Servius who will guard the Roman people, as well as the Tarquinius family in times of trouble.

It is noteworthy that in all instances Tarquinius Priscus, a rather good ruler, a fearless warrior and an intelligent and energetic king, unconditionally obeys his wife and acts according to her counsel.

Not only did Tarquinius give Servius Tullius a good education, but also freed him and made him his relative. He gave King Servius his only daughter, presumably named Tarquinia, as his wife.

The Tarquinius family was preparing Servius Tullius for the throne, which is, to put it mildly, absolutely incomprehensible, because there were two sons in the family - Lucumo (Lucius) (later Tarquin the Proud) and Aruns - as well as a daughter.

Tanaquil played a decisive role in Servius Tullius' life, when murderers, sent by Ancus' sons, wounded Tarquinius with an axe and the king died.

The strength of Tanaquil's character was best revealed here. She immediately assesses the situation and sees that her efforts are being rendered futile - her husband is dying; her children are apparently underage; Tullius' authority among the Romans is not such as to ensure that he is elected king.

Tanaquil musters all her spiritual strength. She does not rush to mourn her husband. Quite the opposite, she hides the fact of his death and she addresses the troubled people from a window of the palace. She assures the Romans that the king is alive, that he is lightly wounded and his life is out of danger.

She introduces Servius to the people, saying that he will act as king during the king's 'infirmity'.

She then addresses her confused and troubled son-in-law, saying: 'If you are a man, Servius, this kingdom is yours; it does not belong to those who committed immoral and perfidious acts through others. Brace yourself. May the gods lead your way, for they, who once shrouded you in divine light, imparted to us the message of your glorious future. May that divine fire enflame you! Now it is indeed time for you to wake up! We, foreigners, also wielded the throne. Remember, what matters is not who you were born of, but rather who you are' (I, 41, 3).

Servius, like Tarquinius Priscus, fulfills Tanaquil's every command without question and takes part in a performance staged by Tanaquil - accompanied by Lictors and clad in Trabei, he ascends the royal throne and conducts the court. He takes decisions pretending to be counseling

with the king. All this continues until the queen concludes that Servius already gained necessary recognition and it is becoming dangerous to hide the king's death. Only then does mourning and wailing begin at the palace and Tarquinius Priscus' death is announced.

Had it not been for Tanaquil's determined actions, it is hard to imagine how events would have unfolded in the life of the Tarquinius family or the whole of Roman history.

Despite the fact that Servius Tullius was the first to become king through the consent of the 'fathers' and without being elected at the popular council, sources say that he was the best among kings.

The sources are silent about Tanaquil's fate after Servius' accession to the throne – she seems to have disappeared from the course of history. We know nothing about her later life, nor about when, where and how she died; whether or not she lived to see her sons marry Servius' daughters or her son's accession to the throne and Servius' assassination.

It is probable that she did not live to see the latter of these events for her prophetic gifts and energy would have saved Servius Tullius from suffering.

The strength of this woman's character, her wisdom and practicality fueled the envy of her daughter-in-law Tulia, who was trying to push her husband, Lucius Tarquinius (later Tanquin the Proud) to the throne by way of evildoing and violence and viewed Tanaquil as an inspiring example. 'Tanaquil, a foreigner, had enough spiritual strength to ensure that both her husband and then her son-in-law became king, one after the other' (I, 48, 6), she used to say.

Naturally, Tulia, who did not refrain from murdering her sister, her brother-in-law and lastly her father, cannot be viewed in the same light as Tanaquil, whose spiritual strength had nothing to do with Tulia's appalling cruelty.

It is noteworthy that Tanaquil was not just involved in the intrigues of the royal court. Apart from being familiar with the art of prophecy, which has been mentioned above, the sources say that she was famous for being a diligent householder.

According to Pliny, for example, the design of a type of toga is attributed to Tanaquil. According to this author, this – straight toga – is Etruscan, where it represented the royal apparel (Toga Regia). In Rome unwed young women (nubentes virgins) and recruits wore such togas.⁴

⁴ Plinius, *Naturalis historia*, VIII, 194.

Discussing in his *Roman Questions* the origin of *Where you are Gaius, I am Gaia*, an inseparable formula of the Roman wedding, Plutarch remarks that one of the sons of Tarquinius Priscus and his beautiful and noble wife – Gaia Caecilia – were the first to pronounce these words.

Here Plutarch makes a mistake for Gaia Caecilia is in fact Gaia Caecilia Tanaquil, who was the wife, rather than the daughter-in-law of Tarquinius Priscus (both of his daughters-in-law, the daughters of Servius Tullius, were named Tulia).⁵

Plutarch even describes a statue to Gaia Caecilia, standing in one of the temples: 'Gaia Caecilia, a beautiful and kind woman - her bronze statue has stood in the holy temple from time immemorial; there are sandals and a spindle nearby – the former being a symbol of her status as a family woman, the latter that of her diligence.'⁶

In order to determine whether or not Tanaquil can be portrayed as a historical figure, first of all it is necessary to find out whether information about her that is kept in ancient sources is congruous with the status of women in Italy, specifically in Etruria in VII-VI centuries BC. That is to say, to examine the credibility of the reports that women from Tyrsenia were able to exert a serious influence on events unfolding in their families, as well as in public.

Etruscan epigraphic, iconographic and Roman sources attest that the status of women in Etruria was different from that in the rest of the world.

Despite being a patriarchal system, Etruscan society assigned special rights to women. Even though man (*pater familias*) established his laws in the family, woman (*mater familias*) had her say, and her word was often decisive.

Apart from this, Etruscan women enjoyed a certain amount of freedom, something their contemporary Greek or Roman women lacked - they attended sporting and theatrical spectacles, feasts and various other rituals.⁷

In the wall paintings of the Etruscan burial grounds, women were depicted next to men both in feast scenes and during various spectacles.⁸ Depiction of a family couple is also frequent on Etruscan sarcophagi. As a

⁵ Плутарх, *Моралии*, Римские вопросы, 30, перев. И. Брагинской, вступ. статья А. Лосева, Москва-Харьков 1999.

⁶ Plutarchos, *Aitia Rhomaika*, Uibi Tu Gaius, ibi Ego Gaia, 30.

⁷ Staccioli R. A., *Gli etruschi, mito, realtà*, Roma 1990, 31.

⁸ Tomba dei Triclini (470 BC), *Tarquimia* in: Antonio Giuliano, Giancarlo Buzzi, *Splendore degli Etruschi*, Milano 2000.

rule, the man gently embraces his wife and directs his glance at her, while the latter's glance is directed at the viewer.

Speculation about Etruscan women's freedom, which circulated in the ancient period, gave some grounds for such anecdotal reports encountered in a number of sources.

This issue significantly digresses from the topic of our research but we will note briefly that the information on Etruscan women kept with Athenaios refers to Theopompus' reports, which present Etruscan women as unbridled and even debauched, which is said to be a result of their excessive freedom.

'Theopompus says in book CLIII of his *Histories* that Tyrrhenians always have their women with them; they take care of their bodies very well and appear in men's society stark naked. At feasts they do not sit next to their husbands and are free to communicate with anyone among those present there. They toast whoever they like. They drink heavily and are exquisitely beautiful in appearance.⁹

Modern Etruscologists unanimously agree that these reports by Theopompus are insinuation.¹⁰

Authors of the ancient period referred to Theopompus as maledicentissimus (Cornelius Nepos).

Etruscan women, who enjoyed relative freedom, were incomprehensible for the Greeks who only knew of inhibited wives or courtesans in men's company.

However, one can assume that apart from kindling biased interpretation and scandalous curiosity, it could be that Theopompus' aggression served other ends.

Specifically, it is a known fact that the cities of Miletus and Sybaris, which had been rivals to Athens in the past, maintained closed ties with Etruria and their cooperation, hampered the development of trade activities in Athens.

By rebuking the Etruscans, Theopompus of Athens aimed at engaging in negative propaganda against the Etruscans to portray them as a segment of a hostile and morally reprehensible world (an attempt at leveling similar accusations is encountered elsewhere, where Etruscans are blamed for savage cruelty and piracy).

Let us say a few words about 'Tanaquil' and the name of the Etruscan women in general. A majority of Etruscologists believe that Tanaquil is a

⁹ Athenaios, *Deipnosophistai*, XII, 515.

¹⁰ Staccioli R. A., 1990, 32, *Le Donne in Etruria*, a cura di Antonia Rallo, Roma 1988.

Romanized version. In reality it must have been an Etruscan name, whose Etruscan rendition is Thanacvil/Thanchvil. The first one of these is the archaic form of the name and thus better corresponds to Tanaquil.

According to many Etruscologists, *chvil* (*cvil*) means 'a gift, alms' and is frequently encountered in Votive inscriptions. For example, *tinsvcvil*, *tinscvil* – means 'offered to (God) Tin' and it should mean the same in the name Tanaquil.¹¹

In general, it should be said that in Etruscan proper names, the name of the maternal family was necessarily mentioned alongside that of paternal family. For example, Larth Arnthal Plecus' clan Ramthase Apatrual is translated as Larth, the son of Arthal Plecus and Ramthase Apathrual. The latter is the name of Larth's mother.

Despite Romanization, this tradition did not disappear among the Etruscans (A. Papirius L. F. Alfanats – Avlus Papirius, the son of Lucius, born of Alfanas, G. Cilnius Maecenas – Gaius Cilnius (maternal family) Maecenas (Maecenas – paternal family)). Despite the fact that maternal names were used, it is important to bear in mind that in the majority (if not the most) of cases, the maternal name followed the paternal one and children received paternal, rather than maternal family names.

Tanaquil's figure proved to be appealing not only to authors of historical narratives but to poets as well.

Apart from this, it is noteworthy that interest in her did not abate even in the late ancient period.

For example, in his poetic epistles Ausonius (310-394) speaks highly of Tanaquil – in a message about 'Relatives' Ausonius addresses his relative by marriage, Pomponia Urbica, the wife of Julianus Censor: 'Urbica, you inherited your noble name from ancient morals and customs Your husband was distinguished Censor; Strong in inborn virtues and enriched also by those that her spouse, that Her father and mother taught - That Tanaquil, that the Pythagorean Theano possessed, and that Perished without copy in the death of her husband.'¹²

We believe it is not accidental that Ausonius mentions Tanaquil of Tarquinius and Theano of Croton, two women linked with the Etruscan world, as 'teachers' of nobility for Urbica (Theano is believed to have been the wife of [Pythagoras], the Samian philosopher). One could assume that Pomponia Urbica also came from Tyrsenia.

¹¹ Pallottino M., *Etruscologia*, Milano 1984.

¹² Ausonius, *Parentalia* (Pomponia Urbica consolerus uxor Uliam Censoris), *Epistulae*.

Ausonius once again returns to Tanaquil in a letter to his friend Pontius Paulinus.¹³

As a young man Pontius Paulinus, also known as Saint Paulinus, was a brilliant secular poet, who later converted to Christianity. He distributed his possessions among the poor and practiced ascetic life from the year 393. He established a monastery in Nola, where he was bishop from the year 409. Despite the fact that Paulinus wrote hymns infused with Christian spirit in form, he did not digress from Ancient norms.

The 80-year old Ausonius is amazed by the way of life of his pupil. He does not understand what prompted an immensely gifted poet like him to abandon the Beothian muses. He urges Paulinus to return to literature and his old way of life.

Tanaquil tua nesciat istud.../Your Tanaquil will not know anything.
(XXV, 31-32)

Ausonius compares Paulinus' wife Therasia, who converted to Christianity before her husband (390 c. AD), to Tanaquil.

By this metaphor Ausonius points at Therasia's strong character and the fact that she has a great influence on her husband. Apparently, Ausonius believed that Paulinus' decision was strongly influenced by his wife.

In his reply, Paulinus is trying to reassure his teacher: 'Do not reprimand me for my wife or my arbitrariness. My mind like Belerophonos did not become troubled. And my wife is Lucretia, rather than Tanaquil.'¹⁴

Alongside Tanaquil Paulinus here he mentions Lucretia, who is encountered in Ovid's *Fasti* and epitomizes marital obedience and devotion.

Consequently, according to ancient sources, Gaia Caecilia Tanaquil, who was linked to three Roman kings - 1. Lucius Tarquinius Priscus, the fifth Roman king (who was her husband); 2. Servius Tullius, the sixth Roman king (she was her step son, who later became her son-in-law); 3. Lucius Tarquinius the Proud, the eighth and last Roman king (who was her son), had a great influence on the events of the early period of the Roman history.

At the same time, we believe that if the information that is kept with ancient period authors is compared with Etruscan iconographic and epigraphic sources, one can easily assume that Tanaquil of Tarquini was a historical figure, who lived between VII-VI centuries BC.

¹³ Ad eundem Pontium Paulinum Epistulis subinde scripta.

¹⁴ Pontius Panlinus, *Epistulae*.

This strong-willed, determined, clever and diplomatic aristocrat from Tyrsenia can confidently be called the first woman politician in Roman history.

It is quite impossible to describe valuably the mythological events in the 'kings' period' of Roman history without taking into account the personality of Gaia Caecilia Tanaquil, a wife of the fifth king of Rome, Tarquinius Priscus.

The importance of this person is underlined in numerous sources of ancient period. Among authors are: Livy, Dionysus of Halicarnassus, Plinius the Elder, Pontius Paulinus, Ausonius, Claudianus and others.

To establish Tanaquil as a real, historical person, it is important to elucidate, how the information from Ancient Literature is comfortable to the status of women in old Italy, especially in Etruria (Tanaquil, as it is known, was from Etruscan city of Tarquinii) in VII-VI centuries BC.

Otherwise, how it is possible to believe that Tyrrhenian women had a serious influence not only upon their own family but also upon the whole society in general.

To our opinion, according to findings of ancient sources with taking into consideration Etruscan iconographical and epigraphical data, it is possible to suppose that Tanaquil was a historical person, living in the edge of VII-VI centuries BC.

This conclusion is valuable in the research of early Roman history and in identification and verification of numerous personages, connected with personality of Tanaquil.