ANTIQVVS

Passion for Past Civilisations

Autumn 2024

Moorish Architecture in Spain

Issue 20 £6.00
ISSN 2631-8113

Evil-Averting Etruscan Art

The Beauty of Roman Amber

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What Lies Beneath in Roman Wales

Etruscan Antefixes
Aesthetically Distinguished, Mysteriously Charged

Michael Svetbird

In this article I would like to focus on one interesting architectural element: Etruscan antefixes, which, along with capitals, entablatures and friezes, combine constructive function with rich artistic and design features, as detailed below.

An antefix may generally be defined as a plaque closing the outer end of the final cover tile in each row running down from the ridge of a roof to its eaves. They differ from acroteria in this way – a pedestal to support a statue or other ornament, which were placed at the top and sides of a triangular pediment. It was designed to prevent the penetration of rain by screening or diverting it in some cases, much in the same way as a gargoyle through its mouth, and served to prevent the wind from dislodging the tiles that it protected. While functional in origin, the antefix was soon adapted as a decorative element in both public (religious) and private (domestic) relief and painted decoration. Their form was determined by adjacent tiles, but by around the mid-sixth century BC, the plaque had become larger than its neighbour to facilitate the addition of more decoration.

Antefix representing a female head. Perugia, Umbria. Etruscan, Archaic period, late sixth century BC. Painted terracotta. Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Antefix depicting a female head. Roselle, near Grosseto, Tuscany. Etruscan, Archaic period, late sixth century BC. Painted terracotta. Museo Archeologico e d'Arte della Maremma, Grosseto (see also page 10, above left). https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Right: antefix representing a female head with an openwork nimbus reassembled using fragments of different provenance and restorations. Etruscan, Classical period, fifth century BC. Painted terracotta. Palazzo Altemps, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome, Evan Gorga Collection (see also page 9, above). https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Antefixes are described in the late Republican period with some precision by the Roman architect Vitruvius (c. 85–c. 20 BC). In his celebrated work *De Architectura* (*On Architecture* 10.4–5), he pays particular attention to the relative proportions of their various elements. While this work is considerably later than the Etruscan period, it is clear from both his description and archaeological finds, that their material construction (terracotta), relief, and their painted decoration was broadly similar, as demonstrated by antefixes in the Metropolitan Museum and other institutions.

When contemporary urban architecture is examined from the mid-1990s, especially modern office, public, or multifunctional projects in central or business districts of cities, an obvious interplay of architecture with large forms is apparent. This is particularly true of the most renowned and creative architects, such as Zaha Hadid Architects, Richard Rogers Partnership, Foster + Partners, Rem Koolhaas, Jean Nouvel, Renzo Piano, and others, who design monumental and iconic projects in key locations around the globe. Striking external forms, advanced design, and intricate elevations often transform a building (or complex of buildings) into a kind of gigantic modern artistic object that dominates cityscapes alongside more traditional buildings.

Structural and engineering features of such projects (supporting load-bearing elements, for instance), not to mention smaller constructive components, are either subordinated to the general design concept, emphasising striking external form, or are concealed and not visible.

In addition to the progress in technology, design trends, fashion and ideology of urban planning and development, this concealment of minor features is obviously explained by the significantly increased volume of buildings, both in area and height, compared to pre-twentieth century architecture.

Massive buildings in the modern era are often perceived as conceptually integral and compositionally harmonious from a distance, in contrast to the incomparably more modestly sized buildings of Graeco-Roman architecture.

In ancient times buildings were, naturally, closer to the gaze of an observer and, accordingly, antique 'development projects' had to be more directly connected with the beholder, more harmonious and 'intimate', stylistically and structurally adequate, reflecting publicly common perceptions and beliefs.

Looking at an antefix from the side, it essentially appears as an L-shaped bracket, its vertical element Vitruvius terms in Greek as an *antibasis*; its larger horizontal component, a *subjectio* (above right). The antefix was fixed at the base to the wooden joint of a roof, with a front decorative panel rising above the edge of the eaves (above right). Modern contractors sometimes use similar elements to fix roofing tiles, only much smaller ones, made of metal and distributed over the entire surface of tiled roofs. It is curious that the technology of laying roof tiles and their forms have not changed much over the past two to three thousand years.

The way antefixes originally appeared, and their constructive and decorative solutions, are clearly visible in the Etruscan Temple of Alatri reconstructed in the grounds of the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia in Rome. This full-scale model, assembled in 1889–1890, was modelled on the ruins of a temple discovered at Alatri in Lazio (between Rome and Naples) (page 7, above). The model repeats the decorative designs of the architectural terracottas of the original temple that dates between the third and second centuries BC. The museum also displays two restored segments of tiled roofs and cornices with antefixes (page 7, below; page 8, above).

From the perspective of modern 'Homo technologicus' (modern human technology), available construction materials and development technologies certainly did limit ancient architects and designers, but the 'closeness' and 'connectivity' of architectural projects to 'Homo antiquus' (ancient human technology) undoubtedly made it possible to convey the spirit, message, and reflections of

Side view of Etruscan antefixes revealing their basic structure. Archaic through Classical period. Their frontal views and more detailed information is presented on page 14. The British Museum. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Antefix representing a Gorgon's head or Gorgoneion, attributed to the Master of Apollo. Temple of Apollo, Veii, Latium. Etruscan, late Archaic period, c. 510 BC. Painted terracotta. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Reconstructed antefixes surmounting the roof of the model of the Temple of Alatri.
Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

all immediate social, religious, and artistic fashions in the smallest detail observable at a close range.

Both approaches, today designers' experiments with large forms, on the one hand, and ancient meticulous attention to architectural details and their refined decoration, on the other, have appeal. For instance, I enjoy futuristic, large-scale projects designed by modern architects, as in the case of Zaha Hadid's masterpieces, equally, the richly decorated details of classical architecture, such as capitals, entablatures and, not least, antefixes.

The architectural term 'antefix' (deriving from Latin: '*antefixum*', plural, antefixes or antefixa) translates from Latin as literally 'before fixed' ('*ante*' – 'before' and '*fixus*' – 'fixed') which, in essence, describes a kind of stopper that fixes some structure in front of it. This terminology seems to define antefixes as functional and technical features rather than suggest an artistic or symbolical meaning. However, in the modern era, antefixes tend to be admired in museums for their artistic and cultural aspects which impress and attract further interest.

'Detail' or 'elaborate detailing' are probably the key words when considering elements of classical architecture. To expand, details (structural elements) and detailing (decoration) are precisely what capture one's imagination and make an impression while observing a relatively small structure from a close range or standing next to it, unlike modern projects.

Attention to detail is evident in all types and forms of classical art, sculpture, and architecture, which had its genesis in the Neolithic period, and continued throughout classical antiquity, the medieval, and postmedieval period through the nineteenth century.

Reconstruction of the roof of the Temple of Apollo. Veii, Latium. Etruscan, late Archaic period, c. 510 BC.
Painted terracotta. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Reconstruction of a temple roof with original antefixes. Falerii Novi (probably from the Sanctuary of Mercury). Etruscan, Archaic period, sixth century BC. Painted terracotta. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Antefix mould depicting the head of a female with long curly hair wearing a diadem encircled with painted tongue motifs (above); the decoration is repeated in a modern cast (below). From Vulci. Etruscan, Late Archaic period, 500–480 BC. Painted terracotta (mould). Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

In classical architecture, a clearly defined detailing of individual elements in external and internal decoration in particular, can be traced from general architectural solutions to particular elements, such as column capitals, entablatures, and pediment friezes.

The earliest antefixes, dating from the first half of the seventh century BC, appear to have been integral to undecorated terracotta roofs in Corinth in Greece. Decorated antefixes appeared in the second half of the seventh century, and their forms varied according to region and roof type. Those on Corinthian roofs tended to be decorated with floral patterns while examples in Laconia generally had geometric designs. In other areas, there was a tendency for figural decoration, particularly in north-western Greece, Italy, and Asia Minor. During the Classical period (c. 480–323 BC), Greek buildings often had marble antefixes with modest floral designs deriving from earlier terracotta examples in Corinth. In the Hellenistic period (323–31 BC), these often-surmounted elaborate lateral simas (the upturned edges of a roof that formed the gutter) with floral decoration and lion-head spouts, in both stone and terracotta. During the Imperial Roman period (27 BC–AD 476), terracotta antefixes remained fashionable, but their decoration arguably did not match the quality of their Classical and Hellenistic predecessors.

Antefixes were produced in moulds, which were modelled with great skill and extraordinary detail (right). As a type of decorative applied art depicting palmettes, figures, masks or heads, antefixes – aside from sculptures per se – are considered the earliest known sculptural elements of temple decoration. Accordingly, they have endured all stages of (decorative and applied) transformation and development, from the somewhat restrained style of the Archaic period to the Imperial 'marble grandeur' of the Roman Empire.

The most frequently encountered antefixes in museums – well preserved and familiar to modern observers – are

Antefix representing a female head with an openwork nimbus. Etruscan, Classical period, fifth century BC. Painted terracotta Palazzo Altemps, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome, Evan Gorga Collection (see page 5, right). https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Etruscan, which are elaborate, mysterious, and artistically distinguished, developed in city-states throughout Etruria (modern Tuscany). Their development of sculptural relief and painting began in the Archaic period during the sixth century BC. Beginning as relatively simple and more generalised relief and restricted colour variation, it progressed to more detailed, expressive, and ostentatious decoration (crowns, halos, rich ornamentation). The floruit of Etruscan architecture and its decorated reliefs was the early Classical period, in the early fifth century BC.

Most antefixes discovered are thought to derive from temples rather than private buildings, and the evidence for the latter context is scant. This perception is determined by modern archaeology, because cult buildings are better preserved than residential dwellings, since they were built more thoroughly and from more durable materials. Moreover, temples were larger structures and could be used by multiple generations over the centuries. Consequently, their decoration and various architectural elements survive in greater quantity.

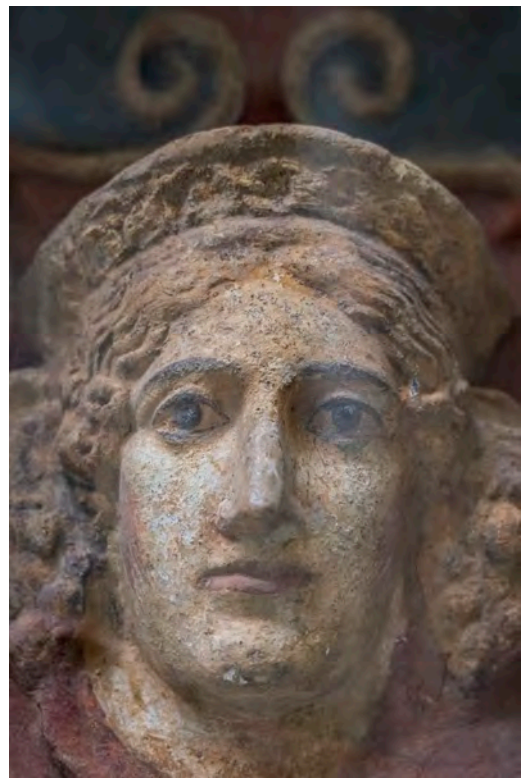
Like many heritage objects of the Etruscan civilisation in the pre-Roman period (from the eighth and third–second centuries BC), antefixes are artistically distinctive, although they derive from Greek culture, as in the case of manifold aspects of Etruscan civilisation, nonetheless, they are curious in that they express a somewhat localised

Antefix representing a female head. Perugia, Umbria. Etruscan, Archaic period, late sixth century BC. Painted terracotta. Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia (see also page 5, upper left). https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Antefix depicting a female head from Roselle. Found near Grosseto, Tuscany. Etruscan, Archaic period, late sixth century BC. Painted terracotta. Museo Archeologico e d'Arte della Maremma, Grosseto (see also page 5, lower left).
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Below and right: antefix representing the head of a maenad in a shell-like frame. Cerveteri, Lazio. Etruscan, Classical or Hellenistic period, c. 400–300 BC. Painted terracotta. The British Museum, London, inv. GR 1893.6-28.2 (B 621).
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

'derivative' interpretation of mythological characters and events, which is echoed on painted ceramics and frescoes. Differences in architecture are also apparent, with the Etruscan temple differing from Greek edifices in that they had a frontal emphasis, influencing Roman temples in this way. Also, where Etruscan temples are concerned, only the foundations and stylobate (platform) were made of stone, and the structural elements above – columns, entablatures, roofs – were built with timber and clay (bricks, tiles, roofing tiles), with terracotta fired at low temperatures. Terracotta was primarily used in decoration too, for pediment friezes and sculptures, entablature elements, and, not least, antefixes. This of course explains the numerous finds of different terracotta artefacts – predominantly



antefixes – which characterise Etruscan architecture. Most of them, those we now have the pleasure of seeing in museums, date from mid-late sixth–fourth centuries BC.

Etruscan terracotta antefixes vary in size, from 10–20cm in height, to much larger terracottas of 60–70cm, sometimes considerably exceeding this; as in the case of the so-called Selinunte Antefix, found in 1955 at the site of Selinunte, a Greek colony in Sicily, which was 1.6m in height (not illustrated in this article).

They are present in many forms relevant to their purpose, from nearly rectangular or angular-geometric, to semi-circular or gently curved, flat, convex, and concave. However, at least based on what we see, I would say that the relief images on antefixes are quite

restricted in their typology. Most of these are female heads deriving from Greek mythology and related personifications (mainly maenads, prominent female members of Dionysus' retinue), and Nereids (sea-nymphs, daughters of Nereus, the old man of the sea), therefore, 'second tier' mythological characters (pages 5, 9; page 10, above left, right; and other examples). Also common, are Gorgoneions (apotropaic–evil-averting faces) or similar 'derivatives' of the Gorgons, the three monstrous sisters, Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa (page 6, below; right). The next most popular representations are satyrs and/or mythological monstrous characters (like the giant Typhon), also of the 'second tier' (right and

page 12, above). Floral ornaments frequently decorate antefixes, such as palmettes and tongue-like motifs (page 6, left; above right; page 13, above left; and other examples). Rare, are small sculptural reliefs that may present deities or other primal mythological characters which are life-size, such as a possible depiction of Artemis (page 13, below left), or depictions of maenads leading drunken satyrs and Silenus, personalities from the ecstatic retinue of the god Dionysus (page 13, above and below right).

Sculptural reliefs with realistic (Classical and Hellenistic style) figures of deities appear mainly on Roman antefixes dating from the first century BC–first century AD,

Antefix representing the head of a Gorgon. Capua, Campania. Etrusco-Campanian, Archaic period, c. 550-500 BC. Painted terracotta. The British Museum, London, inv. GR 1877.8-2.5 (B 596). https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Left: antefix depicting the head of a woman wearing earrings. Cerveteri, Lazio. Etruscan, late Archaic period, 520–500 BC. Painted terracotta. The British Museum, London, inv. GR 1893.6-28.4 (B 624). https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Antefix representing the head of a satyr, once surrounded by a shell-like frame with a floral scroll. Cerveteri, Lazio. Etruscan, Classical or Hellenistic period, c. 400–300 BC. Painted terracotta. The British Museum, London, inv. GR 1893.6-28.1 (B 623). https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Antefix depicting a bearded Typhon grasping two snakes.
Capua, Campania. Etrusco-Campanian, Late Archaic or Classical period, 500–450 BC. Painted terracotta.
The British Museum, London,
inv. GR 1877.8-2.14 (B 587).
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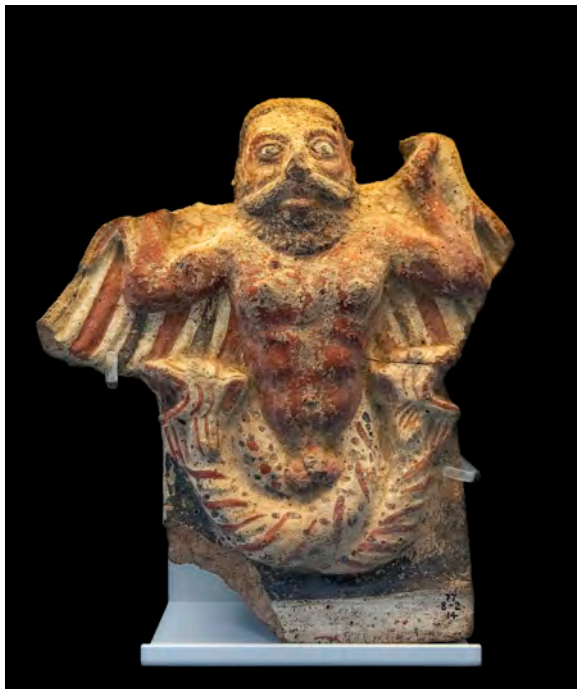

Antefix depicting a Nereid riding a sea monster.
The Sanctuary of Mercury, Falerii Novi, Lazio.
Etruscan, Hellenistic period, c 250 BC. Painted terracotta.
Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

as on the later antefix with Dionysus mentioned above or Venus and Mars preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (not illustrated in this article).

This demands a question: if Etruscan antefixes are mainly a characteristic of temple architecture, directly confronting the observer at the front end of the building, often hanging over it from above, then why do these reliefs frequently depict either minor mythological characters and/or abstract motifs and mythical creatures with a negative reputation? Can we imagine satyrs and sea monsters on the Parthenon, for example? Temples were clearly not dedicated to Typhon, Gorgons, satyrs, or maenads, so why did they frame the cornices of Etruscan temples rather than the deities to whom the temples were dedicated? In short, it seems logical to think that such antefixes played a similar role to sculptures of grotesques, gargoyles, and chimeras in medieval Gothic architecture, that is personifying the presence of malevolent forces in everyday life while using them to ward off evil.

Naturally, the artistic traditions and canons of mythological iconography set by Greek artists and inherited by the Etruscans play a primary role here. Curiously, in sculpture, frescoes, and vase-painting, gods, goddesses, and heroes dominate artistic spaces, but Gorgoneions, Medusa, and satyrs, also frequently appear in Etruscan vase-paintings. In connection with the suggestion made above, it is generally accepted that the image of a Gorgoneion was considered an effective and most popular form of symbolic apotropaic protection (from Greek: '*apotropaios*', 'to ward off') helping to repel the evil eye, spirits, and bad luck, and in this sense were a type of amulet. In the Graeco-Roman world, Gorgoneions are often present on floor mosaics and above doors in the entrances of houses, and on armour. For example, the celebrated Alexander Mosaic from the House of the Faun in Pompeii (housed in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, late second century BC, inv. 10020), depicts Alexander the Great with a Gorgoneion on his breastplate. Curiously, it seems that apotropaic representations were placed over side elevations so as not to conflict with the gods or goddesses who were the focal point of worship in temples.

When admiring antefixes in museums, although they appear as isolated artistic objects, it is interesting to consider that they were mass-produced from moulds, which perhaps best explains the restricted number of representational types and their uniform nature through the Etruscan era (page 14, below right). For example, antefixes representing female maenads in the British Museum (page 10, below left; right; page 11, left) and an antefix in the Musei Vaticani, all from Cerveteri, Lazio, are similar.

Antefix styled as a palmette. Capua, Campania, Etrusco-Campanian, Archaic period, 540–500 BC. Painted terracotta. The British Museum, London, inv. GR 1877,0802.9. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Antefix fragments depicting a satyr and maenad. The Sanctuary of Apollo of Scasato, Falerii Novi. Etruscan, fifth century BC. Painted terracotta. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

In artistic terms, the latter maenad (mentioned above), from 400–300 BC (page 10, below left; right) has a realistic maturity. From a modern perspective this may be considered as a masterpiece. It is delightful not only in the harmony of its proportions, but also in its masterfully conveyed facial expression. This seems emotionally charged, conveying a specific message – certainly spiritual – that the Etruscan artist wished to convey and inspire in people who beheld it, which underscores its apotropaic function.

There is also a technical matter to consider here. How was the emotion of the image between the person who cast the antefix and the artisan who painted it articulated? Was there some kind of 'working meeting' at which artistic and spiritual 'project solutions' were discussed and considered? Was one workshop involved, somewhere in the Cerveteri area (modern Lazio, north-west of Rome), where it was obviously easier in terms of coordination to discuss in detail and implement the designer's artistic intent, or were several workshops involved?

Antefix depicting a mounted woman with a bow, Artemis or an Amazon. Capua, Campania. Etrusco-Campanian, late Archaic period, 525–500 BC. Terracotta (originally painted). The British Museum, London, inv. GR 1877.8-2.16 (B 600) https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Antefix representing a maenad with Silenus. The Sanctuary of Apollo Soranus, Falerii Novi. Etruscan, Archaic period, sixth century BC. Terracotta (originally painted). Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Periphery of an antefix composed of tongue-like motifs, palmettes, volute, and openwork. Lanuvium, Latinum. Etrusco-Latin, late Archaic or early Classical period, 470–520 BC. Painted terracotta. The British Museum, inv. GR 1890.6-14.1 (B 605) (see also page 6, above). https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

From the Archaic period onwards (c. 600–480 BC), antefixes were produced in great numbers throughout Etruria and in the cities of Caisra (Cerveteri, Lazio), and Capeva (Capua, Campania). The production of antefixes, of course, demanded a skilled workforce, workshops with kilns, the manufacture of moulds, and storage facilities.

Antefixes are framed with scrolls and floral elements (page 10, below left; right; page 11, below right); crown-like nimbuses (page 5, right; page 9, above; and other examples); plant ornamentation, including leaves and/or palmettes (page 8, above left; page 14; and other examples). Therefore, the representation per se, both aesthetically and functionally, comprised a single, structured object, with its painted colour palette uniting the central relief and its framework.

The pigment preserved on antefixes allows us to observe the peculiarities of its polychromy, consisting of faces or masks and their individual features (eyes, pupils, eyebrows, lips, hair) and associated decoration painted in a variety of colours to a specific convention. Their multiple presence, coupled with the building's colourful architecture, contributed to the building's elegance and significance.

Below: periphery of an antefix composed of tongue-like motifs and palmettes. Capua, Campania. Etrusco-Campanian, Archaic period, 550–500 BC. Painted terracotta. The British Museum, inv. 1877.8-2.5 (B 596) (see also page 6, above). https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Bottom: antefix representing the head of a female. Capua, Campania. Etrusco-Campanian, late Archaic period, c. 520–500 BC. Painted terracotta. The British Museum, London, inv. GR 1877.8-2.1 (B 589). https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Antefix representing a god, probably Zeus, Jupiter or Veiovis clutching a thunderbolt between his teeth. Vulci, Lazio. Etruscan, Hellenistic period, third–second century BC. Painted terracotta. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Modestly-sized antefixes depicting nimbus-headed females, possibly dedicated to Vei or Demeter, or a divinity connected with the underworld. The Sanctuary of Vigna Parrocchiale near Cerveteri, Lazio. Etruscan, Classical period, 500–450 BC. Painted terracotta. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Large antefix representing the head of Silenus (and a maenad to the right, not well-preserved) in a nimbus with palmettes and lotuses. Roof of Temple A, Pyrgi, Latium (near Cerveteri, Lazio), Etruscan, Classical period, 460 BC. Painted terracotta. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Modestly sized antefix depicting the head of a female. Vulci area (Necropolis of Osteria), Lazio. Hellenistic period, c. 300 BC. Painted terracotta. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Etruscan antefixes mainly had a palette which echoed that of frescoes and cinerary urns, consisting of black, carmine, cherry, shades of ochre and blue. These must have originally been more vibrant and nuanced, and it is of course the case that through the long passage of time since they were first applied their visual impact has faded.

It should be stressed that the colours and the execution of the painting on antefixes on the whole are what singles them out among ancient, moulded forms. Their subsequent painting could not be mechanised and was always done painstakingly by hand. Yet, despite the mass-production of antefixes, artistic freedom of expression was maintained in many cases, and some deviations in detail were naturally inevitable. This is noticeable, for instance, if we compare photographs of similar objects from different museums. In this regard, I wonder if the differently coloured eyes of the antefix in the British Museum (page 11, left) is the result of deliberately implemented 'artistic freedom', as an exception, or simply the erosion of its pigment? Curiously, the 'sister-image' of this representation from the Musei Vaticani does not have such specific distinguishing details.

From the viewpoint of a modern visitor, ancient art admirer, and researcher, a restrained ability to observe and compare samples of similar antefix forms limited by time, space, and the size of museum collections, perhaps represents an intriguing positive factor. If they were conserved in their thousands what would be the interest then in trying to find differences in them or identify individual features?

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