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1Centro studi per l’archeologia pubblica Archeostorie®, g.cappelletti@archeostorie.it

Abstract

The Diver is part of Masterpiece, an Italian podcast by Archeostorie® that describes some of the most beautiful and famous artworks from antiquity.

I am flying. Or maybe not?
I have left earth but not touched water. I dive but I am not falling. I am not man any, I am not bird nor fish.
When did I take the leap? A moment ago, a year…. Time is strange and cruel: my life has been the flutter of a wing compared to this immense instant.
A drop of fresh resin: it oozes, runs on the trunk; it thickens and slows, it stops. And here I am, the diver, a helpless insect frozen in amber for eternity.
But I am alive, yes, I am alive. Or maybe not?
I do not feel the air on my skin. I do not fear the cold slap of the water. How many times have I leapt?
Do I know how to swim? I don’t remember.
The voice of my mother, the music of banquets, the taste of wine, the challenges of love: everything grows remote, fades away…

Fig. 1. Tomb of the Diver, Detail from the underside of the top slab of the grave (source: Wikimedia Commons).

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I do not feel fear I am at peace. The sea is calling me. I have chosen to answer.
I would have been able to fight it, of course; to fight, to lose, and to fall like a stone in the turbulent waters. I preferred instead to meet my destiny with a final dive, the most elegant. I've never been this alive before. I close my eyes. This is the end. Or maybe not?

In 2018 Paestum celebrated the 50th anniversary of the discovery of the Tomb of the Diver, famous for its splendid and enigmatic paintings. A beautiful exhibition, curated by Gabriel Zuchtriegel, the director of the Archaeological Park of Paestum, illustrated the many possible meanings of these images, and how the various interpretations are linked to different points of view.

The tomb owes its name to the scene painted on the inside face of the slab that closes it. Yes, that's right: the inside face. No one would have been able to admire the frescoes after the funeral ceremony, which was held sometime around 470 BC. This was the first tomb decorated with figurative scenes anywhere in the ancient Greek world.

But why a diver? It is not a scene of competition, given that swimming was not yet a sport at that time. More likely, the fresco depicts the dive into a new life on the other side, a life in which the official Greek religion did not believe, but which was the core [core/center — literally pivot] of the many esoteric creeds successfully spread throughout Magna Grecia during this era. It was believed that after death one could acquire bliss and forms of knowledge that were unthinkable in life. Therefore it was necessary to face the great leap, the dive into the unknown. In death, courage was needed—as also in life.