



The bronze liver of Piacenza

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An Etruscan model of a sheep's liver cast in bronze (the cover image) was found in a field near Piacenza, a small town not far from Milan in Italy. Etruscan oracles could predict the future based on the shape and position of the liver lobes of sheep, an art called 'hepatoscopy' (1).

The model is around 7.5 to 12.5 cm and is roughly dated to the year 100 BCE. It shows the visceral side of a sheep's liver, divided by lines into quadrants, which were, in turn, divided into four additional regions. The regions corresponded with the territories of the gods in the universe as indicated by their names engraved in the regions.

In the Etruscan model, the liver is reversed, with the convex part of the gallbladder pointing down. On the right side of the gallbladder, we find a pyramid-shaped structure that was referred to as the processus pyramidalis corresponding with the caudate lobe in humans. On the other side of the gallbladder, we see a protrusion that was called the processus papillaris corresponding with the paracaval part of the caudate lobe. Variations in appearance of these two structures formed the basis for reading the organ in divination. When important decisions had to be made, a sheep's liver would be consulted and the final decision thus placed in the hands of the gods.

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