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Etruscan Bone Mirror Handles

Figured carvings in ivory and bone form a small, precious group in the repertory of Etruscan art. Chronologically, they fall into two groups: the Archaic and the Late Classical and Hellenistic. Among the latter are handles for bronze mirrors, usually made of bone. Six examples and a fragment of a seventh have been known, all in Italy and most of them in Florence. The appearance of another handle, almost complete and very well preserved, is thus an important addition to our knowledge of Late Etruscan art. Said to have been found at Vulci, the handle is now in the Museum of Art and Archaeology of the University of Missouri-Columbia (shown in color on front cover).¹

In size and general scheme of decoration our handle resembles the others.² Around it are carved in relief two winged female figures, one young, the other old (Figs. 1, 3), both apparently moving to the left; they occupy the full height of the frieze. Their heads are in profile, the torsos in front view, while from the waist down the figures are in profile. Each wears a diadem consisting of a fillet with leaves rising from it. Both wear large sleeved chitons bloused both at the waist and around the thighs, the folds increasing in size below each girdle.³ The sleeves are gathered at five points along the upper arm. The outlines of breasts and legs are clearly visible beneath the garments. The wings are folded out and seen in front view; they touch the upper border and descend to within 1 cm. of the bottom. Each woman holds an object (ca. 1 cm. long) at about shoulder level.

Along the lower border, fitted into the space between the tips of the wings and the women's legs, is a small seated figure on either side (Figs. 2, 3). The one at the right seems to have been mostly cut away and the other is badly abraded. Each was apparently the figure of a child, seen in front view. The one at the right has the left leg drawn up vertically, the other drawn up and lying out to its right; the second figure has both

legs folded and lying out to its left. In the latter one can see that the right arm is bent at the elbow, with the hand at the waist probably holding some object, while the left arm reaches down and out to its left, the hand possibly resting on the left knee.

An important aspect of the Missouri handle is the comparatively good preservation of the polychrome decoration—gilding and red and blue color. Both diadems seem to have been entirely gilded, as were the objects held by the women. The small feathers of the upper part of the wings as well as their scaled borders are largely painted with bright red, and in many places gilding can be seen over the paint. It is not possible, however, to discern a clear pattern such as an alternation of red and gold feathers. The background was deep blue, best seen in a patch just over the young woman's right shoulder and also visible along the outer edge of her right wing, where blue color extends into a hole through the bone. There are clear traces of red on the young woman's lips. While almost all the color preserved is on the upper third of the handle, there are slight traces of red on the legs of the small figure at the right, bits of gold on the body of the other and a trace of red on the hand that rests on the left knee. There may be flecks of gold along the lower border of one woman's garment. The over-all color scheme is thus clear: a dark ground against which the figures were silhouetted; the small wing feathers picked out with red and gold, red on the lips but no accentuation of other facial features; a possible gilded border on the garments; probably some gilding on the bodies of the small figures as well as touches of red. The ensemble was richly colorful, though the painting was probably highly fugitive, requiring a minimum of handling with a maximum of care.

Evidence of color on other bone mirror handles is minimal.⁴ The polychromatic scheme on ours is best paralleled in relief scenes on

1. Below: bone mirror handle, actual size, two views, showing figure of young woman (at left) and older woman (at right) carved in relief. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia.

Opposite page:

2. Above: enlarged details of handle showing two small figures seated between the women. These can be seen more clearly in Figure 3.
3. Below: extended drawing of the mirror handle (actual size). Drawing by Dona Barton.



1





2



3

4. Bronze mirror in Vienna with carved bone handle still attached.



roughly contemporary Etruscan stone sarcophagi. Particularly close is the color treatment on a panel showing the Sacrifice of Polyxena, one side of a sarcophagus in Orvieto⁵ dated fourth or third century B.C. The background is also blue; red is used for small areas of drapery and a golden yellow for the hair of several figures. Winged demons on panels flanking this scene have red on the upper parts of their wings, blue on the longer feathers. A similar scheme is seen on the end panel of the somewhat earlier painted Sarcophagus of the Amazons in the Archaeological Museum in Florence, dated about 350 B.C.⁶ Here the background is almost

black, with red-brown, bright blue and golden yellow used on the garments and armor of the combatants. The use of a dark background in Etruscan wall paintings may be traced back to the large frieze of the Tomba delle Bighe of the early fifth century B.C., where the change from the usual light ground has been attributed to the influence of red-figure vase painting.⁷ Although the convention never caught hold in painting, where it does not reappear until the Sarcophagus of the Amazons, it did become common on sarcophagi with reliefs, which were popular from the late fourth century on. A good third-century example is the sarcophagus of Velthur Partunus in Tarquinia,⁸ and a still later cinerary urn indicates that the same color scheme prevailed in the latest Etruscan reliefs.⁹

While the polychromy of our mirror handle is closely related to relief sculpture in stone, the iconography seems to belong with the mirrors.¹⁰ Beginning late in the sixth century B.C. bronze mirrors were produced in large quantities for about three hundred years. Only in the latest groups were some mirrors cast with a handle,¹¹ the others had a tang to fit into a wooden or bone handle. Although no wooden handle for an Etruscan mirror has survived,¹² simply worked bone handles occur in quantity,¹³ in some instances still attached to the mirrors.¹⁴ A fine example of an elaborately carved bone handle remains attached to a mirror in Vienna (Fig. 4).¹⁵

When, late in the fourth century B.C., the decoration of mirror handles with figures rather than geometric ornament began, it must have been evident that a greater diameter was required to accommodate the figured frieze. While the simple handles average 2-2.5 cm. in diameter (as far as one can tell by comparing them with the mirrors, since dimensions for the handles are seldom given), the figured handles range from 3.7 cm. to 4.85 cm. in diameter, the largest being the one at Missouri. While these larger handles offered ample room for the figured decoration, the one figured handle found still attached to its mirror (Fig. 5) illustrates the poor join to the thin tang. There is no evidence for any transitional element, which might have been of wood, nor of any terminal member at the bottom, such as is found on some of the simpler handles. The arrangement seems very



5. Bronze mirror in the Archaeological Museum, Florence, with carved bone handle.

6. Bone handle in the Archaeological Museum, Florence.



awkward, but since the handles are quite luxurious, one must assume either that there are missing elements or, as seems more probable, that mirrors with such handles were intended as grave offerings and not for daily use. This is also suggested by the fugitive colors with which our handle is decorated.

THE COMPOSITIONAL SCHEME on all of the figured mirror handles is similar—two figures the full height of the frieze, one on either side of the cylinder. In almost all cases the figures are winged, the wings folded out touching the top

of the frieze, the long feathers ending near the bottom. The space between the figures or their wings is almost always filled by some smaller element, usually a shield or helmet. Of the six fairly complete handles listed by Huls,¹⁶ the first three have two nude male figures in frontal pose, wings folded out, mantles thrown back over the shoulders and held by brooches, a spear in the right hand and, in two cases, a shield resting on the ground at the left (Figs. 5,6); on the third handle the helmets are carried in lowered left hands. Two handles have two fish-tailed monsters brandishing fish; the

7. Handle showing fish-tailed monster with folded-out wings, in the Bargello, Florence.



8. Handle showing Athena with gorgoneion (left) and youth holding club-like object (right). Terme Museum, Rome.



monsters have the usual folded-out wings (Fig. 7). All five of these handles are in Florence, four in the Archaeological Museum, the one with monsters in the Bargello.

Of the three variant handles, one is in the Terme Museum (Fig. 8) unique in having a winged figure of Athena wearing a chiton and peplos with a large gorgoneion, a spear in her left hand, her right hand extended and holding an object now missing; a low, pillar-like object stands beside her left leg. The other figure is a nude youth in frontal view with head facing to his right toward Athena and holding a club-like object in his right hand. Carlo Anti interprets the youth as one of the Dioscuri and implies that the other was also present,¹⁷ but this is unlikely, considering the general scheme of such handles and the unusually large diameter required to accommodate a third figure.

The second variant, in the British Museum (Fig. 9),¹⁸ was not known to Huls. It is probably not a mirror handle but is included here because of the close similarities in the figured decoration. It shows (on the right) a winged female figure wearing a chiton, the torso in front view, her head turned to the right and her right leg bent so that the tip of her shoe touches the ground, giving the impression that she is walking. An alabastron is held in her left hand, her arm bent so that the top of the vase is at waist height. In her right hand she holds a perfume dipper above her head. In front of her a dog seated on its haunches looks up toward her. Facing her is a youth, nude but for a cloak over his shoulders, wearing a helmet and holding a spear. Between the two figures is a vase on a pedestal shown in perspective (partly visible at the youth's left); it resembles an amphora without handles and is decorated with beading around the widest part, with ribbing below.

The Missouri handle offers a third variant. It is the only one with two female figures as well as the small figures rather than the more usual fill ornaments. While there are female figures on both the Terme and the British Museum pieces, they resemble those on the Missouri example only in details. The Terme figure is clearly Athena, identified by the gorgoneion. The woman on the British Museum bone cylinder is likened by Brian Cook¹⁹ to Zipna on a

mirror in Leningrad, taken by Gerhard to be either a goddess of Fate or an attendant of Aphrodite, judging by the attributes.²⁰ While the two figures on the Missouri handle are dressed identically, they are distinguished by their differing ages, young and old. The young woman's hair is neatly dressed and seems to be gathered into a cloth which keeps it off her shoulders. The old woman's hair, on the other hand, seems to rise in separate strands (see Figs. 1 and 3). This style is seen on other mirror handles (Figs. 6 and 7). The two women carry similar objects, not easy to identify. Their main characteristic is an apparent limpness, which suggests nothing so much as partly filled bags. There is a small knob-like projection at both ends of each object; one shows creases at the middle;

9. Bone tube with two figures in relief. British Museum.



both were gilded. Is the container possibly an animal skin tied at either end? I know of no such object on Etruscan mirrors, except perhaps that held by the youth at the left on a mirror in Corneto,²¹ but what seems an exact parallel appears on a fragmentary stele, dated ca. 470-460 B.C., from Pharsalos in Greece, now in the Louvre.²² Here the object held by one of two maidens is considered to be a bag or purse which probably contained knucklebones, a few of which are held in the second maiden's hand. Each has her hair bound in a manner similar to that of the younger woman on our bone handle. The relief is interpreted as representing a "sacra conversazione" and, if the identification as knucklebones is correct, may be connected with a cult of Aphrodite. If such an interpretation were carried over to the Missouri handle, we would be in the same realm as the British Museum piece, with its attributes related to Aphrodite. This would certainly be most suitable for mirrors deposited in women's graves.

The Pharsalos stele has, however, been interpreted differently. Schefold, for one, felt that the object held in the hand of one of the maidens is a folded fillet or taenia, and what Berger interprets as knucklebones he took to be small flowers.²³ There are many scenes on Etruscan mirrors showing winged figures, often identified as Lasae or messengers, carrying a fillet or crowning another figure with it.²⁴ Others show figures wearing fillets which, when folded, might resemble the objects carried by our winged females.²⁵ One mirror shows two Lasae preparing the deceased woman for her journey to the other world; a Lasa adjusts her fillet.²⁶

THE SMALL FIGURES between the Lasae are nowhere paralleled on Etruscan bone mirror handles, nor on any other bone carvings published by Huls.²⁷ However, similar figures do occur on a number of Etruscan mirrors. They are usually chubby, winged children, often seated and with legs in positions like those on the handle.²⁸ They are invariably on the mirror flange immediately above the handle, subordinate to the main scene and probably serving as a fill ornament. That is probably their purpose on our handle as well. Yet their similarity to Eros may again suggest a connection with a

cult of Aphrodite, noted above as a possibility.

With regard to its date, our handle certainly belongs with those classified by Huls as Late Classical, the very end of the fourth century B.C., rather than to her Hellenistic period.²⁹ Cooney has chosen a date of 275 B.C. for the Missouri handle, but without discussing it.³⁰ Because of the strong archaistic nature of the female figures, they offer little help in dating. Although the two minor figures are badly preserved, they are more useful. The short, chubby arms and legs clearly indicate that these are children, while the position of the legs recalls the so-called "temple boys," seated figurines that were popular in many parts of Greece in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.³¹ While the type was better known in the eastern Mediterranean, it has been found in Italy and Sicily as well,³² where it could have served as a model for the figures on the mirror handle. Corinthian figurines and molds for such figures come from the most closely dated contexts: the figurines from deposits of the second half of the fifth century B.C., the molds in fourth-century contexts,³³ showing that the type continued at least into the first half of that century. Even with these indications, the internal evidence for dating the Missouri handle is not conclusive and we can only rely on Huls' dating of the entire group. I would suggest 300 B.C. as an acceptable general date.

The bone mirror handle now in Missouri is thus an important addition to a very special class of Late Etruscan art. Even within this small group it stands apart iconographically and adds new depictions to the scant repertory of figures on these handles. With its general condition better than most, it offers much more than any other example for our understanding of the polychromy that was apparently a regular feature of these luxurious offerings.

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¹ In preparing this article I have been helped most generously by a number of scholars. My thanks go first to Prof. Giacomo Caputo, who kindly provided descriptions and photos of the handles in Florence, as well as

permission to publish them, also to Prof. Gianfilippo Carettoni, for the handle in Rome. Mr. Brian Cook and Dr. Ann Birchall have done the same for the figured bone cylinder which is published here with the permission of the Trustees of the British Museum. Mr. Leslie Cornell, a graduate student at the University of Missouri, wrote a paper on our handle some years ago, and I have profited greatly by his iconographic study. The drawing for Figure 3 was made by Miss Dona Barton. The acquisition of the handle was announced in Frederick Cummings, "The Art Museum: Growth through Gifts," *The Missouri Alumnus* (March 1964) 7, fig. 14. The handle has also been illustrated by John D. Cooney, "Siren and Ba, Birds of a Feather," *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* (October 1968) 263, fig. 4.

² Acc. No. 63.18. Preserved height, 10 cm. but there was probably a plain border at the bottom like that at the top, which is 5 mm. high. Such a border is seen best on No. 86795, National Archaeological Museum, Florence, published as Catalogue No. 111 in Yvonne Huls, *Ivoires d'Etrurie* (Brussels/Rome 1957) 83, pl. 49 (hereafter Huls). The section of bone, identified by Dr. B. M. Gilbert of the Department of Anthropology, University of Missouri, as being from the femur (probably the right one) of *Bos sp.*, is roughly cylindrical (max. diam., 4.85 cm.); the soft cellular interior structure has been removed, leaving a shell which varies from 3 mm. to 8 mm. in thickness. The preserved height of the figured frieze is thus 9.5 cm.; the depth of the carving is as much as 7 mm. in some places, leaving precariously thin spots; in fact, just behind the young female figure's head the eggshell-thin fabric has broken. Along the border of this figure's right wing and at about the level of her right wrist a hole (diam. 2 mm.) pierces the bone shell in a sharply downward direction; Dr. Gilbert identifies this as a natural hole for a blood vessel, the *nutrient foramen*. The hole may possibly have been used for a pin for attachment.

³ Margarete Bieber, *Griechische Kleidung* (Berlin/Leipzig 1928) 20.

⁴ Huls, 177.

⁵ Giulio Q. Giglioli, *L'Arte Etrusca* (Milan 1935) pl. 347 (in color).

⁶ Raymond Bloch, *Etruscan Art* (Greenwich, Conn. 1959) pl. 75 (in color).

⁷ Frederik Poulsen, *Etruscan Tomb Paintings* (Oxford 1922) fig. 15.

⁸ L. von Matt, M. Moretti and G. Maetzke, *The Art of the Etruscans* (New York 1969) 68 (in color).

⁹ Maria Santangelo, *Musei e Monumenti Etruschi* (Novara 1960) 36, right (in color).

¹⁰ J. D. Beazley, "The World of the Etruscan Mirror," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 69 (1949) 1-17, remains the best summary of this very large group.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pl. 11.

¹² A Greek bronze mirror of the beginning of the fifth century B.C. with a well preserved wooden handle was found in mud near the sacred spring at the Sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron (see *Scientific American* 208, No. 6 [June 1963] 115).

¹³ Huls, 109-116, lists about fifty examples.

¹⁴ Von Matt, Moretti, Maetzke, *op. cit.*, 193, shows a mirror

of the fourth or third century from Todi, now in the Villa Giulia Museum, with its handle turned in simple torus moldings. A mirror of about 350 B.C. in the British Museum (*Arch. Reports* 1966-67, 51, fig. 14) has an ivory handle with simple moldings, with a more elaborate conical terminal element.

¹⁵ *Jahreshefte des Oesterreichischen archaologischen Instituts* 29 (1935) 158, Abb. 59. I am indebted to Prof. Dr. Rudolf Noll, Antikensammlung, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, for the photograph and permission to publish it.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, 83-86, nos. 111-114, 116-117.

¹⁷ Carlo Anti, "Athena Marina e Alata," *Monumenti Antichi* 26 (1920) 306-307.

¹⁸ British Museum No. 1884.6-14.30. Castellani Sale Catalogue, Hotel Drouot, 12-16 May, 1884, no. 255, illustration on p. 27. No other publication. The total length is 17 cm., the figural frieze 14 cm. high. Much longer than the other pieces, it is socketed at either end and was most likely from a piece of furniture.

¹⁹ In a letter of May 19, 1975.

²⁰ Eduard Gerhard, *Etruskische Spiegel* III (Berlin 1865) 56, pl. 322.

²¹ *Ibid.*, IV, 213.

²² The stele, often published, is discussed most recently by Ernst Berger in *Das Basler Arztreilief* (Basel 1970) 117-118, figs. 138, 139. I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. Jane C. Biers, for this and the following reference.

²³ Karl Scheffold, *Meisterwerke griechischer Kunst* (Basel/Stuttgart 1960) 222, no. VI 249.

²⁴ Gerhard, *op. cit.*, I, pls. 142-143; III, pl. 322 (border); IV, pls. 3, 22 (border).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I, pls. 112 and 232.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, I, pl. 216.

²⁷ Somewhat similar are the figures on two ivory appliques listed in a sale catalogue of Muenzen und Medaillen, Basel (Sonderliste O, December 1972, 22, nos. 58 b and c). These are youths shown leaning on one knee, the other drawn up sharply in front, their heads turned sideways and upward; they are identified as prisoners. The figures are 9 cm. and 8.5 cm. high, much larger than ours. It is the position, particularly the drawn-up legs, which is most like our small figures.

²⁸ Gerhard, *op. cit.*, I, pls. 212, 213; III, pls. 290, 322, 374.

²⁹ Huls, 203.

³⁰ *Loc. cit.* (see note 1, above).

³¹ Such figurines were made at Corinth, among other places, and the type is fully discussed in Agnes N. Stillwell, *Corinth XV, Part II* (Princeton 1952) 114-116. The molds for making seated-boy figurines, found in the Potters' Quarter at Corinth, are discussed in A. N. Stillwell, *Corinth XV, Part I* (Princeton 1948) 105-106.

³² *Corinth XV, Part II*, 116, note 6. Four examples from Sicily in the British Museum are published most recently in Reynold A. Higgins, *Catalogue of the Terracottas in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, British Museum I, Greek: 730-330 B.C.* (London 1954) 314, nos. 1156-1159. The type is now fully discussed by Theodora Hadzisteliou-Price in "The Crouching Child and the Temple Boys," *Annual of the British School at Athens* 64 (1969) 95-111; see especially p. 98.

³³ *Corinth XV, Part II*, 114-115.