

THE HORNED HAND: AN ACQUIRED DEFORMITY, OR JUST ANOTHER ETRUSCAN MYSTERY?

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In the summer of 1978, Mr John Hueston spent several days as a guest of our unit in Pisa. During the traditional visit to the Guarnacci Museum in Volterra, he was fascinated by an unusual anatomical deformity which was repeatedly displayed in the sculptured figures on the Etruscan cinerary urns, of which this museum has a large and famous collection. In many of the sculptured figures, the fingers of one hand, usually the left hand, had adopted the position known as "the sign of horns", with the index finger and little fingers fully extended, the middle and ring fingers partially or completely flexed (Fig. 1).

The unusual position of the fingers, its repetition in so many of the sculptured Etruscan figures and the possible reasons why the museum in Volterra should house such a large collection were the main topics of conversation and argument on our way back to Pisa. Mr Hueston made us promise to investigate this enigma: this paper is an attempt to offer a possible explanation.

The Etruscans inhabited a large part of the Central and Southern Italian peninsula, long before the Romans. Very little indeed is known for certain about their origin and nothing much can be made of their language "which even in antiquity was said to resemble no other known speech. Their sculpture was not of marble, but mainly in bronze,



FIG. 1. Cinerary urn in alabaster from the Guarnacci Museum in Volterra. The left hand, with the fingers in the "horned" position is supporting the lower jaw of the reclining figure.

or terra cotta; the coarse local stone was used for carving coffins and tomb monuments” (Stobart, 1934). From ancient accounts the Etruscans were regarded as cruel, gluttonous and superstitious, much pre-occupied with thoughts of the tomb and fears of the underworld. Indeed, Arnobius, quoted by Bloch (1958) remarked that “Etruria had been at the same time mother and creator of many superstitions. . . .”.

Volterra is now a small town in Southern Tuscany, some 50 miles south-east of Pisa. It was once one of the leading Etruscan cities reaching its greatest fame during the declining years of the Etruscan empire, when the coastal towns were invaded by pirates and barbarians. Those people who could afford it moved inland to the safer hills of Volterra and this sudden influx of wealthy and influential immigrants made Volterra flourish when other Etruscan cities were struggling for survival.

It was the custom of the aristocratic and wealthy families in Volterra to keep the ashes after cremation and this may well explain why the local museum has such a large collection of cinerary urns. Most of these urns belong to the same period (320 B.C. to the end of the 1st century) and are beautifully made in sandstone, alabaster and terra cotta. The most famous centres for this type of work were Volterra, Chiusi and Perugia (Banti, 1969). The general design of the cinerary urns followed a standardised pattern: a lower box containing the ashes and bones, and a lid. The front of the lower box was usually decorated with bas reliefs representing scenes from everyday life or Etruscan mythology. Sometimes the bas reliefs depicted the departure of the deceased from this world with friends, relations and servants assembled to bid him farewell.

The lid usually carried a sculptured figure of the dead man or woman, lying on the left side in a semi-recumbent position. This was the position adopted by the wealthy Romans and Etruscans during their meals and banquets, and in several of these sculptures the left hand will be seen holding an unusual type of cup or bowl. The Etruscans were no different from other ancient civilisations in their conviction that they needed to eat and drink in the next life (Bloch, 1958). It was therefore perfectly natural to represent a dead man eating and this belief in the importance of food and drink after death is confirmed by Alain Hus (1958).

A closer look at the sculptured figures on the lid of the cinerary urn will usually show the left or right hand holding a bowl or cup with the digits in the typical “sign of horns” position (Fig. 2). Yet many of the figures represented on the lids or on the bas reliefs held nothing in the hand, though the fingers still retain this peculiar attitude, with the hand supporting the chin, holding a stick, or adjusting a robe—activities that are unnatural and even impossible with the fingers in such a “horned position” (Fig. 3).

How can we explain the frequency of this peculiar position of the fingers on these Etruscan cinerary urns? Cristofani and Cristofani-Martelli (1975) have suggested that the “sign of horns” should be regarded as an “apotropaic” gesture (from the Greek *απο* = away: *Τρεπεῖν* = turn away)—a position which in some magical way will ward off evil spirits. This interpretation was certainly known to Pliny: it was portrayed in the Ravenna mosaics in the 6th century, and the superstition is still prevalent today in many parts of Central and Southern Italy.

Distinguished Etruscan scholars such as Banti (1969), Cristofani and Cristofani-Martelli (1975) have produced evidence to show that the cinerary urns in Volterra and elsewhere were “mass produced”, and Stobart (1934) has stated that “the reclining figures representing the dead feasting in paradise were not actual portraits, but stock types from the stone cutter’s repertory”. It has even been suggested that the *face* of the reclining figure on the lid was the only feature to show any significant variation from the standardised stereotyped pattern and that many of the bas reliefs were repeated without alteration. This “mass production” theory could well explain the repetition of “horned hand” deformity, but does not explain why the original model or “prototype”



FIG. 2. Cinerary urn in alabaster from the Guarnacci Museum in Volterra. The left hand of the reclining figure is holding a cup ("patera umbilicata") with the fingers in the "sign of horns" position.

was portrayed with the fingers held in this extraordinary position. Indeed, this theory seems untenable for several reasons:

1. The sculptured figures on the lids are not always as stereotyped as has been suggested, and sometimes may be a very accurate portrayal of the deceased.
2. The scenes on the bas reliefs are often very varied in design.
3. It is hard to believe that the same stereotyped model would be copied for 300 years without modification.
4. It is unlikely that the aristocratic and wealthy Etruscan families would wish to have themselves portrayed on cinerary urns with a hand deformity that did not have a more reasonable and socially acceptable explanation than following the fashion set by the local stone cutter, or potter.



FIG. 3. The lower part of a cinerary urn from Volterra exhibited in the Archaeological Museum in Florence. The bas relief represents a funeral banquet with several of the guests holding their hands in the "horned" position.

Perhaps this Etruscan enigma has a simpler explanation, and the key to the mystery may be the design of the cup or bowl and the way it is held in the hand.

The cup (or "patera") was an essential item of Etruscan domestic pottery, with a convex lower surface containing a central recess into which the middle and ring fingers were inserted. Because of its unusual shape, the cup was called a "patera umbilicata" (Fig. 4). It could be held even more securely by placing the tip of the thumb on the rim of the bowl. The "patera" was a vessel used for the pouring out of libations during sacrificial rites and for drinking (Virgil). It was a vessel widely used in the Mediterranean and adjacent countries and was presumably held in the hand in the same manner.

It is not certain whether the "patera umbilicata" was also used to hold food, but the Etruscans were regarded even by the Romans as "mighty eaters" (Diodorus Siculus) and as meals amongst the aristocracy were lengthy affairs, the patera was probably held in the hand for long periods. Huergon (1961) pointed out that eating was so important in the Etruscan way of life that even women were allowed to take part in the banquets, an observation confirmed by Pallottino (1955) and others.

Is it possible that continued use of the patera could have produced an "acquired deformity" in the middle and ring fingers? The special anatomical relationship of the extensor tendons on the back of the hand already allows the middle and ring fingers a certain advantage in adopting the "sign of horns" position. If these 2 digits were incarcerated for several hours each day in the hole of a well-filled and constantly replenished patera umbilicata, one could postulate that the flexor muscle bellies to these 2 digits might well develop a functional hypertrophy and so produce an acquired flexion deformity. It is interesting that no children's hand and no slaves or servants are depicted with this deformity, presumably because the former were too young, the latter because they could not afford to use the patera often enough.

From our investigations, we would like to draw the following tentative conclusions:

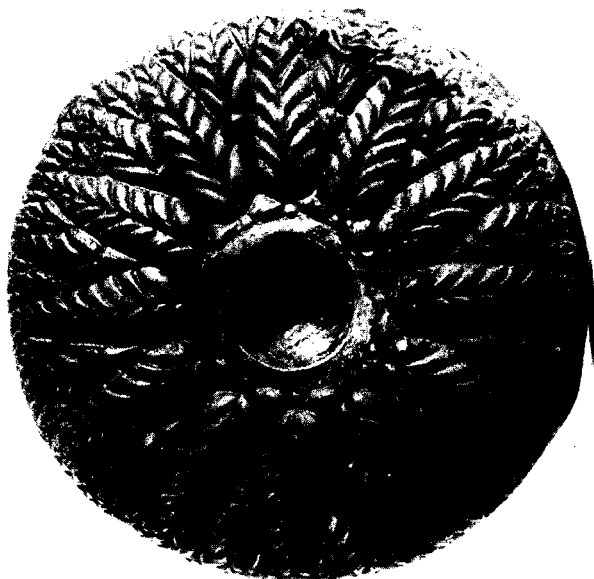


FIG. 4. "Patera umbilicata" in metal from the Archaeological Museum in Florence. The bottom of the cup shows the central hole in which two flexed fingers were inserted. This particular type of cup was also called a "patera filicata" because of the decoration with ferns.

1. The position of the fingers known as the "sign of horns" was familiar to the Etruscans and was certainly well known to the stone masons who carved the cinerary urn sculptures in Volterra and other Etruscan cities.

2. It was the natural position adopted by the fingers when holding the "patera umbilicata" for drinking, pouring out libations (and possibly for eating).

3. It is possible that the repeated use of the "patera umbilicata" might produce in time a fixed flexion deformity of the middle/ring fingers so that the Etruscan sculptors (and their patrons) would see nothing unusual in reproducing the deformity in a hand that was *not* holding a patera. It could also be argued that the effect of rigor mortis might accentuate the muscular hypertrophy of the flexor muscles of the ring and middle fingers and draw attention to the muscular imbalance in the hand.

4. How the "sign of horns" came to be recognised as an "apotropaic gesture" by the Etruscans themselves is another story. Etruscan scholars, such as Cristofani and Cristofani-Martelli (1975), have noted the "sign of horns" in their study of antiquities but have usually taken the gesture to be an apotropaic symbol. In the book "Scultura Tardo-Etrusca di Volterra", Laviosa (1965) published an illustration of a painting of a ritual dance for the dead on the Tomb of the Lioness at Tarquinii in which one of the dancers holds her left hand up with the fingers forked "in a curiously intriguing, possibly ritual gesture".

It is nevertheless interesting to note that the patera was used in antiquity in Assyria, Persia, Anatolia, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, the Balkans, South Russia, Galicia, Italy, France and Spain (von Bothmer) (1962) and it is in many of these countries that the superstition still lingers.

We would like to suggest that the "signs of horns" depicted on the cinerary urns in Volterra might well be an "acquired deformity", or "occupational hazard" of the aristocratic and wealthy families of Etruria.

If this hypothesis cannot be substantiated by further study, then we are afraid that the "hands of Volterra" will remain just another Etruscan mystery.

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