The Tomb of Fastia Velsi from Chiusi

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The modern Tuscan town of Chiusi is the site of one of the major inland cities of the ancient Etruscans. For centuries the settlement, its cemeteries and the extensive satellite communities have been explored, plundered and excavated. To see and study the thousands of objects recovered from this important area one must travel to Italy, but there are a few tomb-groups from Chiusi in North America. Most of these date from the rich Orientalizing period. For example, a 19th century photograph (fig. 1) records one of two tomb-groups supposedly excavated at Chiusi about 1895 and acquired by A. L. Frothingham Jr., the first editor of the AJA, for the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago in 1896.¹ Such record photographs of tomb-groups, with the objects so symmetrically and artfully arranged, immediately prompt the questions: Is this everything that was found in this tomb or just the most interesting or attractive objects? Could the objects have come from more than one burial?

This paper focuses attention on another supposed tomb-group from Chiusi, one with more material and from the later Hellenistic period (fig. 2). It was acquired on November 6, 1913 for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. We know that the antiquities dealer was Raoul Tolentino who had a shop, “Galerie d’Art Ancien” at no. 57 on the Via Sistina in Rome, and that he claimed that the tomb-group had been found near Chiusi.

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figure 1 – Record Photograph of the Chiusi A tomb-group, ca. 1895. Bucchero pottery now in the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago.
The group consists of a large inscribed cinerary urn, a series of silver vessels and toiletries articles, several bronze, silver and gilt mirrors, some gold jewelry, fragments of bone or ivory items, and a single glass bottle. There are a total of forty-three objects in all, but some of the fragments mentioned in the initial 1918 AJA publication by L. G. Eldridge are unaccounted for today. Still others, not recorded by Eldridge, have turned up and are on display. Space does not permit an examination of all of the objects associated with this tomb, but I would like to concentrate on three specific items and some groups.

The largest object is an inscribed travertine cinerary urn that preserves much of its original polychromy (fig. 3). The total height, with lid in place, is slightly over one meter. The lid depicts a woman who wears elaborate jewelry and reclines on two pillows; presumably she represents the deceased whose ashes were placed inside. The front of the container shows a youthful, winged figure with fish-tail legs that brandishes a sword and holds what may be a rock in the right hand. This figure probably represents Scylla, a popular motif on cinerary urns throughout the Hellenistic period in Etruria. The base of the container is carved in an elegant, symmetrical flourish. It is precisely paralleled by a similar urn from Sarteano, just a few miles southwest of Chiusi, now in the Siena Museum. In both cases, it is possible that the lids do not really belong to these specific urns, and some scholars have suggested that the lion carved on the Siena urn is not ancient. For our purposes, only the shape of the urn with its distinctive base is important to demonstrate a type associated with the Chiusi region.

The Boston urn has a retrograde inscription (fig. 4) that runs along the base of the lid and continues onto the left side of the urn. When Eldridge published the inscription in
1918 he provided an erroneous translation that was repeated by almost all later authors describing this object. It is interesting that a more nearly accurate translation was published in another article as early as 1929. This, however, was largely overlooked. I will not confuse the reader with the erroneous renditions but simply report that today we can translate the inscription as: Fastia Velsi, wife of Larza Velu. Larzl is short for Larzal, the genitive form of the diminutive masculine first name, Larza. The family name, Velu, is well attested by other inscriptions from Chiusi.

Hammarström’s 1929 article is valuable for another reason: it provides the most accurate information on the likely provenance of the tomb itself. The dealer, Raoul Tolentino, had simply stated that the tomb-group had come from Chiusi. Hammarström tells us that it, along with four other urns, was discovered in 1879 on property belonging to Count Lucioli whom he interviewed in 1928. If we examine Bianchi Bandinelli’s famous dissertation on Chiusi, published in 1925, we can try to locate this area on his maps. These maps were produced in 1923. The first (fig. 5) shows the area around Chiusi with a particular segment just to the east of the town indicated in the shaded box. The detailed map (fig. 6) corresponds to this segment and shows the Colle Lucioli. In 1877 this land, which had earlier been called the “Colle del Vescovo” or “Pomponiana,” was appropriated for a new cemetery. The building of this late 19th century cemetery resulted in the discovery of a number of Etruscan tombs which Bianchi Bandinelli records on his map. In his catalogue, however, these tombs are given cursory treatment, probably because most of them had been sold and dispersed more than forty years earlier. He makes no mention of the Boston urn and the associated contents despite the fact that Eldridge’s article had appeared seven years earlier than his catalogue. At least we can say that Hammarström’s date of 1879 for the discovery of the tomb corresponds well to the initial activity at the modern cemetery in 1877. Thus, we can be reasonably certain that the tomb did indeed come from the Colle Lucioli, just east of Chiusi, and was probably discovered in 1879. Furthermore, in 1928 Hammarström was shown four other inscribed cinerary urns that allegedly came from the same tomb. The additional four urns are still in the collection of the descendants of Count Lucioli and are displayed atop the walls of the courtyard of their ancestral home in Chiusi.

But what about the forty-three associated finds? Unfortunately, there is no information on the size or shape of the tomb that contained them. Assuming that it was large...
figure 4 – Drawing of retrograde inscription on urn in Fig. 3.

figure 5 – Map of Chiusi and environs, ca. 1923. From Bianchi Bandinelli 1925, pl. II.
enough to accommodate the five urns mentioned by Hammarström, we can assume that it was large enough to accommodate forty-three funerary offerings. Some may have been placed inside the cinerary urn and others perhaps near it. We will examine just a few of these associated finds, beginning with a group of cosmetic containers. These have been carefully conserved in recent years to reveal objects of great elegance and delicacy.

There are three types of silver cosmetic vases in the Boston tomb-group. First, there are two examples of small, amphoriskos-shaped balsamaria. These are finely crafted silver versions of transport amphoras with pointed bases. Each is about 12 centimeters high and was suspended by silver chains (fig. 7). Chased and gilded decoration enlivens the surfaces with zigzags, garlands, leaf patterns and wave crests. A second type is a cylindrical pyxis with domed lid (fig. 8). There are three of these, all of slightly different diameters, but each about 7 centimeters high. In addition, there are three silver strigils; similar examples appear in related tomb-groups. For example, a group of silver strigils in the British Museum is

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*figure 6 – Map of Chiusi showing Colle Lucioli, ca. 1923. From Bianchi Bandinelli 1925, pl. VI.*

*figure 7 – Silver amphoriskos-shaped balsarium, MFA inv. 13.2867. figure 8 – Silver pyxis, MFA inv. 13.2869.*
said to have come from the Tomb of Seianti Hanunia. These objects were discovered in 1886 at Poggio Cantarello, just four miles west of Chiusi. A contemporary account published in the Notizie degli Scavi tells us that these silver objects had been attached with iron nails to the walls of the tomb; one was still in place in 1886.11 In fact, the best preserved of the three silver strigils in Boston originally had the heavily oxidized remains of an iron nail adhering to its handle. This oxidized nail was removed before 1918.12 Thus, we have another connection between the Boston and London groups.

The group connected with the British Museum contained a pyxis (fig. 9, at the lower right) that is very similar to those in Boston, and there was also a strigil and a silver situla with handle very much like two of the examples in the Boston group. Unfortunately, the objects from this tomb formerly in London have been missing since 1939.

A second tomb-group that shows parallels to the Chiusine material in Boston is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This group, acquired in 1903, is said to have come from an Etruscan tomb at Bolsena.13 Figure 10 shows only a small selection of relevant silver items including a balsamarium, this time with spiral handles rather than suspension chain, a strigil and a pyxis. All three of these items and most of the others in this tomb-group are inscribed with the Etruscan word śuthina picked out with small punches in retrograde. Figure 11 shows it at the base of the New York pyxis, punched upside down and retrograde. This word means
“for the tomb,” i.e., that the object is now dedicated to the deceased and is not to be used by the living. There are no such inscriptions on any of the objects from Chiusi now in Boston or on the items missing from London, but this is not necessarily inconsistent with what we are discovering about funerary practices in Etruria. It seems that the use of the word suthina on funerary goods was mostly restricted to the area of north central Etruria. At least so far, it appears to have been confined to areas roughly bordered by Bolsena and Orvieto, Sovana and Chiusi, but is not a common feature even in these tombs. In any case, all of these gilded silver luxury items are likely to have been imported from Southern Italian workshops (probably from Tarentum) by the Etruscans. A few fragmentary examples have been excavated in Apulian tombs. Unfortunately, most examples have been deprived of their original contexts and could have come from either south or central Italy.

Two types of toilet articles so far examined, the balsamarium and the strigil, appear on engraved mirrors. For example, Figure 12 shows a Prænestine mirror with three nude bathers. The man holds a strigil, but we know from numerous tomb finds and other representations that in Italy at least women as well as men used this item to cleanse their bodies. A balsamarium very much like one in the Boston group is suspended from the mirror’s border; the kneeling woman holds a dipstick that could be used to apply scent or perhaps to mix and apply makeup. Bone or ivory implements of similar type are included in the Boston tomb-group.

The third type of toiletry item is a silver flask with elaborate decoration. Lacey D. Caskey’s drawing (fig. 13) shows the detailed ornamental friezes more clearly than any photograph. This type of vessel often has a small lid but that is missing from the Boston example. Also, of the more than thirty examples of this type now known, all others are made of bronze. The Boston example is the only one in solid silver. Although a few undecorated examples exist, most are covered with stylized vegetal scrolls or repetitious geometric designs executed in low relief with chased details. The bucranium and garland frieze on the bottom of the Boston flask is almost identical to the decoration on the London silver pyxis (fig. 9). On the basis of associated ceramic finds, the flasks with valid archaeological contexts can be dated to the last decades of the 3rd century B.C. It is also interesting to note that many are connected to Chiusi or neighboring sites leading some to suggest that this type of Etruscan flask is a product of Chiusine workshops.
The last group of objects consists of nine mirrors.\(^{18}\) Here again there are three basic types: box mirrors or compacts, bronze mirrors with tangs meant to be inserted into separately-made handles, and handle mirrors of either bronze or silver. The box mirrors are the most unusual. The two examples in Boston are especially rare because they are made of silver with added gilt to embellish the figures or other details (fig. 14). The larger of the two, about 14 centimeters in diameter, has a case with a triangular loop handle. A separately-made polished bronze disc would be inserted into this case and act as the mirror.\(^{19}\) The exterior of the case is decorated with an elaborate relief showing Bacchus attended by a fat satyr and a cupid. The satyr plays the double flutes while the cupid holds a torch. The scene is framed by a cable and a wave crest. I know of only one parallel for this mirror case: an example in the British Museum, said to come from Aquileia.\(^{20}\) It is almost exactly the same size, shows the same motifs, and employs the
same techniques. The only significant difference is that the figured medallion is attached separately to the case while, on the Boston example, it is formed in one piece. Surprisingly, the Boston tomb-group also contains a smaller version of this same type of box mirror.\footnote{21} The subject is identical but the execution is mediocre with a loss of almost all significant detail. Also, the object is smaller (about 10.5 centimeters) and attached as a separate sheet like the box mirror said to be from Aquileia. With so few parallels, it is difficult to assign a date but, simply based on style and mirror type, it is likely that a range in the second half of the 3rd century B.C. is possible for both of these box mirrors.

In addition to these silver box mirrors, the tomb-group also contained two silver handle mirrors.\footnote{22} These are unengraved and of similar size. Both have stylized animal heads terminating their handles. One is slightly piriform like a Praenestine mirror. Silver mirrors are exceedingly rare, not necessarily because they weren’t often produced but because they are so fragile and susceptible to corrosion that they haven’t survived. The

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure13.png}
\caption{Drawing of silver flask, MFA inv. 13.2864. From Eldridge 1918, 263, fig. 6.}
\end{figure}
examples in Boston are exceedingly delicate and thin leading one to conclude that they might have been made expressly for tomb use. In any case, the only good parallel is again from the Tomb of Seianti Hanunia in the British Museum.23

All of the remaining mirrors associated with the tomb-group in Boston are made of bronze. A typical handle mirror is engraved with a winged female figure, probably the Etruscan nymph-like character called Lasa. There is also a less well-preserved example showing a male version of this Lasa type. Both of these mirrors probably date to the last decades of the 3rd century B.C.24

There are a few tang mirrors, including an early undecorated example.25 The tang would have fit into a separately-made handle of bone or ivory, and such exist in the many associated objects.26 The range of dates for these last two mirrors is considerable. The tang mirror (inv. 13.2886) probably dates about 450-425 B.C. or possibly earlier based on comparisons with close parallels from dateable contexts. Thus it may be almost two hun-
dred fifty years earlier than the Lasa mirrors (inv. 13.2889 and 13.2890). We will need to explain this apparent discrepancy.

One of the most unusual mirrors in this collection appears normal until one realizes that it is only 14 centimeters high and 7 centimeters in diameter. This undecorated miniature mirror, one of the smallest extant Etruscan mirrors, may have been a childhood toy in imitation of the regular mirrors adult women used. It is possible that this as well as the oldest mirror, the undecorated tang (inv. 13.2886), were sentimental heirlooms.

The most impressive mirror is a large tang mirror of bronze. Recent cleaning has helped to reveal an engraved scene of great skill and complexity. I have published extensive analysis of this mirror in the Corpus Speculorum Etruscorum and in Etruscan Studies, so will only say here that it belongs to a series of unusually large mirrors sometimes called “grandiose tangs” produced circa 300 B.C. If my reading is correct, the handsome figure on the disc’s left side may be the only extant inscribed representation of Rhadymanthus, one of the judges of the Underworld, in Etruscan art.

Let me now summarize this brief examination of the Boston tomb-group. With the help of Hammarström’s 1929 article, we can be reasonably certain that indeed this material did come from Chiusi. More specifically, it was discovered in 1879 on the Colle Lucioli in a tomb that contained four other cinerary urns. When and to whom the Lucioli sold this material is not known, but eventually Raoul Tolentino acquired it, perhaps directly from them or perhaps through an intermediary, and sold it to the Museum of Fine Arts in late 1913. The inscriptions on the other urns, still in the possession of the Lucioli family at Chiusi, show that all the burials in this tomb were female and that these women were all related, either by blood or marriage to men of the Velsi family. It seems likely to me that although only one of the five cinerary urns is now in Boston, the associated material in Boston may belong to more than one of these Velsi women. The Boston urn is the best produced and most interesting of the lot, so it is quite possible that a selection of the best items from the entire contents was made to accompany it. This would explain the unprecedented number of mirrors, the extensive chronological range of the outlying materials, and the duplication of several types of objects such as strigils, pyxides and balsamaria. Although it is likely that all of the burials took place in the 3rd century B.C. and most of the material is from that time, a few objects are much older and may represent family heirlooms. Space precludes a careful examination of the gold and silver jewelry or the glass bottle, but some of these items too could date earlier than the 3rd century. Four ivory dice, of standard Etruscan type, are also part of this alleged tomb-group. These may provide a clue. Normally, we find a single pair of dice in an Etruscan tomb. When more than one pair exists it is because more than one person is buried in the tomb. These two pairs suggest that the contents of at least two separate burials have been combined by the seller or dealer to produce an extensive array of luxury goods connected to one colorful cinerary urn.

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NOTES

1. For detailed analysis of this group, see De Puma 1976 and De Puma 1986, 60-70. Very similar questions are raised by a series of alleged tomb-groups from Saturnia: Donati 1984, especially 3-6.

2. Preceding Eldridge 1918 is a brief description of the tomb-group in L. D. Caskey’s Annual Report of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 38 (1913) 102 and a mention in AJA 18 (1914) 414. A series of 195 miscellaneous bronze fragments are now inventoried under 13.2860c. At least three of these appear to be fragmentary bronze lids, but one (2.1 x 3.5 cm) shows vestiges of an engraved profile human head and could be a mirror fragment; however, the piece is flat, not concave like most late mirror discs. More certainly connected with a lost mirror is inv. 13.2889b, a badly corroded handle with deer-head terminal, preserved length 9.7 cm. Finally, there is a series of small fragmentary bronze tacks, a bronze ring with attached hanger, and numerous small bronze wires and possible handles. In addition, there are some 184 bone or ivory fragments, some of which are certainly parts of a small rectangular container. See Eldridge 1918, 289-91, figs. 18-19.

3. Inv. 13.2860a: Eldridge 1918, 251-57, figs. 1-2; Comstock and Vermeule 1976, 249-50, no. 385 with earlier bibliography. I am not aware of any published color reproductions of this urn and the museum’s website does not yet include a color photo of it. Richard Norton (1872-1918), who first alerted curators at Boston that the tomb-group was available, traveled to Rome to see it and was given authority to negotiate with Tolentino. Norton’s letter of March 13, 1913 to Arthur Fairbanks describes the group as “…the best horde of Graeco-Etruscan silver, of probably the 4th century B.C., I have ever seen. The ash urn is better than any but one in any of the museums here [in Florence], or Rome or Bologna. It is really of large size, fine in style and covered with paint. The silver vases are not large but three are richly chased and gilded. There is also a fine silver mirror base [box mirror, probably inv. 13.2875]. When these are cleaned and set up with the silver strigils, mirrors, etc. it will be an extremely interesting and noticeable lot…”


5. Hammarström 1929, 233-36, especially 233-34.

6. R. Bianchi Bandinelli 1925.

7. Della Fina 1983; Nielsen 1999, fig. 15. For the inscriptions, see n. 30 below.

8. Inv. 13.2867 and 13.2868: Eldridge 1918, 263-66, fig. 7, A and C.


11. NSc 1886, 356. For a valuable analysis of the skeletal material and sarcophagus, see Swaddling and Prag 2002, also the book review by J. Turfa in BMCR 2005.01.03.

12. This strigil, inv. 13.2872, is illustrated with and without the nail in Eldridge 1918, fig. 14, A-B, respectively. The oxidized nail (inv. 13.2872b) is in two fragments with a maximum length of 12 cm. There are five other iron fragments (inv. 13.2872c) that may belong to other attachments. For a terracotta model strigil with iron hook for attachment, presum-
ably to a tomb wall, see Turfa 2005, 155-56, no. 119.


17. Maggiani 1985, 148-52, also no. 8 on p. 169. The elegant ivy frieze at the center of the MFA example appears again on no. 196, pp. 149-50, an example in Florence, inv. 24034. An example formerly on the Paris antiquities market is made of bronze but gilded in silver, and therefore a bit closer than the entirely bronze parallels: “Galerie Samarcande,” Paris (1988) no. 72. H. with lid, 16.5 cm.

18. For full documentation on this group of mirrors and one bone mirror handle, see De Puma 1993, 37-45, nos. 15-25. Eldridge 1918, 294 gives a cursory account of six bronze mirrors and mentions “a quantity of fragments of bronze plate [that] are presumably the remains of other mirrors.” See n. 2 above.

19. One mirror associated with the tomb-group, inv. 13.2887 (= De Puma 1993, no. 20), just fits but there is no evidence that it was found inside the box mirror, inv. 13.2875. It may belong to another set now lost, or have always been an isolated mirror. If the corrosion products were eliminated it would certainly fit better but it would still be very heavy for the thin delicacy of this specific silver case.

20. Walters 1921, 16, no. 70, pl. VIII. Walters considered the mirror Roman, although he cites the Etruscan parallel in Boston. Aquileia seems an odd provenance and is probably inaccurate. A related but fragmentary object is a bronze attachment for a vessel, thought to be Ionian, and now Berlin inv. 7980: Züchner 1942, 178, fig. 91. For a related group of Etruscan and Roman appliqués, see De Puma 1993, 39.

21. Inv. 13.2876: Eldridge 1918, 257-59, fig. 4; De Puma 1993, 39, no. 16.


23. Walters 1921, 7, no. 24, pl. IV. This silver mirror was found still hanging from a nail on the wall of the tomb. It is larger (37.5 cm long compared to 24.4 and 21 cm for the Boston mirrors; 15 cm in diameter compared to 12.5 and 11.6 cm for the Boston mirrors) and decorated with a gilded wave crest framing the disc. There are a number of other silver mirrors that are now believed to be modern forgeries (e.g., St. Louis Art Museum inv. 113.1924, a replica of a mirror in the Villa Giulia). The best known is a relief mirror in Florence (inv. 74831) copied from an engraved mirror formerly in Munich, but now lost: Fischer-Graf 1982. See also, Carpino 2003, 78-82, nos. 12-16 for more on other replicas of this type in Athens and New York.
24. Inv. 13.2890: De Puma 1993, no. 23. The male “lasa” is on inv. 13.2889: De Puma 1993, no. 22. The missing handle was located and examined in 2005. It is inventoried as 13.2889b and has a maximum preserved length of 9.7 cm.


26. Above n. 14. A cylindrical bone object decorated simply with parallel bands (inv. 13.2901 = Eldridge 1918, 291, no. 5, fig. 19; De Puma 1993, no. 25) is almost certainly a mirror handle and there are other similar objects of varying size that could also be handles for mirrors or perhaps other objects like fans.


30. Inscriptions on the related urns at Casa Lucioli, Chiusi:
   A. Thania Titi Cazrtunei Tlesnasa = Thania Titi, daughter of Cazrtunei, wife of Tlesna. The inscription is on the container, not the lid. The lid shows what may be a male figure and, therefore, may not really belong to this urn. Travertine with patera flanked by peltae.
   B. Fasti Velsi Tutnasa Trepunia/s sec = Fasti Velsi, wife of Tutna, daughter of Trepunei. Travertine saddle-roofed lid with patera between vegetal scrolls on urn.
   C. Thana Velsi Tutnasa Trepunias sec = Thana Velsi, wife of Tutna, daughter of Trepunei. Travertine saddle-roofed lid with patera flanked by peltae on urn.
   D. Thana Tutnei Velsisa = Thana Tutnei, wife of a Velsi. Travertine saddle-roofed lid with patera flanked by peltae on urn.


32. Inv. 13.2896-9: Eldridge 1918, 286–7, no. 1, fig. 17, at bottom. For discussion of several examples from Orvieto, see Turfa 2005, 229. For more on the subject, and the possible symbolic or prophetical function of dice in tombs, see Iozzo 2007, 225. Also associated with the MFA’s tomb from Chiusi are twenty small hemispherical glass objects, of various colors, perhaps game tokens: Eldridge 1918, 293.

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