Androgynous Figures on Etruscan Cista Handles from Praeneste

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ANDROGYNOUS FIGURES ON ETRUSCAN CISTA HANDLES FROM PRAENESTE

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art History in

The School of Art and Design

by
Melanie Naples
B.A. Christopher Newport University, 2021
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ABSTRACT

Muscular women and effeminate men adorn the lids of Etruscan Cistae found in Praeneste (modern Palestrina, 23 miles southeast of Rome, Italy). Cistae (Latin plural of cista) are storage containers used by the Etruscans for women’s beauty items. This thesis focuses on the androgynous, mostly nude, figures that serve as handles and are often displayed in pairs. These pairs frequently depict a man and a woman together and androgynous qualities are usually emphasized on the female figures. Discussions of the androgynous body in the ancient world have centered around Greece and Rome. Only recently (Sandhoff 2007, 2009, 2011), scholarship has started to explore the topic of androgynous imagery in Etruria. Cista handles offer some of the most telling evidence of the complex representations of sexual and gender attributes in Etruscan art and their analysis provides an important contribution to the ongoing debate on androgyny in the ancient Mediterranean.

Androgynous figures of either sex are given the physical characteristics and/or behaviors of the opposite gender. This can be attained through the use of clothing or jewelry or, in the case of the nude pairs, by giving an individual physical features that are more typical of the other sex. Upon examination, it is evident that cista handle male figures take on feminine traits while female figures show masculine characteristics. The women have thick muscles and reduced breasts, whereas the men have bodies that match their female counterparts and have pectoral muscles that mimic small breasts.

This thesis maintains that the androgynous pairs on cista handles take up a transient space between male and female, at times reflecting both genders and occasionally neither, with the only indication of the figures gender being the genitalia on
display. Through discussions of the manifestations of androgynous bodies on cistae, this thesis sheds light on the importance of an ambiguously gendered body to the Etruscan people, and especially to Etruscan women since it is on items of which belonged to them that these androgynous figures appear. It is the contention of this thesis that divine models of androgyny might play a significant role in the design of the cista handles from Praeneste.
INTRODUCTION

In the last three decades, the role of gender in the ancient world has received greater attention. Consequently, focus has increased on depictions of the gendered body. Gender is often considered in terms of male and female, with limited room for anything in between. However, gender expression does not always follow what is expected and gender markers (breasts and genitals) may be hidden. Society and culture often assign norms to determine how men and woman should appear and behave. The question of what makes a man a man and a woman a woman underlies the creation of these gendered norms. Categories and norms are not strictly defined, however, and vary through time and between cultures. Within the ancient Mediterranean, the Etruscan case seems especially interesting and important in this regard.

An androgynous figure falls outside of the labels of male and female. In the ancient Mediterranean, the physical manifestation of both sexes in an individual was often seen as a bad omen and was feared. Intersex individuals were considered by many to be monstrous.¹ In some cases, divination through haruspices or the Sibylline books were consulted to remedy the situation. Frequently, babies that were dual sex were exposed. In Rome, this was sanctioned by the state.² These real-world sentiments towards a dual-sexed nature, do not coincide with representations of androgynous

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¹ Intersex encompasses a scope of conditions in which an individual’s sexual or reproductive anatomy does not fit the binary definitions of male and female. This could be through anatomy that appears to be in between the typical expression of male and female or mosaic genetics. Intersexuality does not apply to the discussion of Etruscan cistahandles because the figures do not have genital anatomy outside of the alternative male/female sex (see: Intersex Society of North America, and their updated site: interACT; for intersex in Etruscan and Roman sources, see: Crifò, G. 1999. “Prodigium e diritto: il caso dell’ermafrodita,” Index. Quaderni camerti di studi romanistici 27: pp. 113-120).
bodies in the visual arts. The presence of androgynous bodies in art suggests some kind of appreciation, perhaps connected to their possible symbolic power.

It is essential to note that androgy and intersexuality do not always overlap. A figure such as a statue could be seen as androgynous because it possesses male and female sex attributes, but it is equally true for a figure to be considered androgynous while possessing only one sex organ. In these instances, an androgynous appearance can be crafted in a few different ways. All are done in order to give qualities of one sex to the other. The figures that make up the cista handles that are the focus of this thesis are androgynous, but they are not intersex.

Androgynous figures played an important role in Etruria as indicated by the frequency of their appearance in art. Most Greek androgynous figures subverted the typical male figure and its norms. Etruscan androgynous qualities, however, can more often be seen in depictions of women. These women take on masculine bodily features and actions. Women’s toiletry items stand out for providing most cases of androgynous imagery and some of the best examples. Although they are not the only source, handles from Praenestine cistae receive the most attention when discussing androgynous figures in Etruria. They provide ample evidence in which to analyze and discuss Etruscan perception of androgynous qualities. This thesis will focus on these androgynous handle figures because of the large number of available examples as well as the consistency in the representations of the androgynous bodies.

In studying androgynous cista handles, this thesis wishes to contribute to the scholarship on androgynous bodies in the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean, as well

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as provide insight into the varied artistic expressions of gender in Etruscan society, primarily through objects that belonged to women. Key questions this thesis addresses are why androgynous figures appear on items closely related to women and beauty and what does this tell us about the owners of those objects.

Bridget Sandhoff has explored the various reasons for an androgyny in Etruscan art: symbolic reasoning, apotropaic nature, and Etruscan taste. Building on Sandhoff’s scholarship, in the third and last chapter, this thesis suggests that divine models played a considerable role. The emphasis in this thesis on the connections between androgyny and the divine in Etruria comes from the belief that investigating this link may prove useful in developing a greater understanding of the interconnections between gender and religion in the culture and views of Etruscan aristocratic women, as well as in our own.

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CHAPTER 1. DEFINITION OF ANDROGYNY AND THE CONTEXT OF ANDROGYNOUS CISTA HANDLES

Before diving into the use of androgyny, it is important for this thesis to define the term. The Oxford English Dictionary defines androgynous as 1. “Originally (chiefly deprecative): designating a man who is effeminate or who has a feminine appearance; (later also) designating a masculine or unfeminine woman. Now more commonly in positive or neutral use: neither clearly male nor clearly female, esp. in appearance; combining elements of masculinity and femininity; of indeterminate sex,” 2. “Of clothing, a hairstyle, etc.: that makes a man look feminine or a woman masculine; that gives the wearer an appearance that is neither clearly male nor clearly female,” 3. “Having physical characteristics of both sexes, (typically) having both male and female sexual organs; hermaphroditic.”

As it pertains to this thesis, an androgynous state is achieved when one takes on the physical characteristics and/or behaviors of the gender that differs from their sex assigned to them at birth. Individuals who exhibit androgynous traits deviate from the gender-based expectations and norms established by society. The achievement of androgyny may be realized through various means, including the use of clothing or jewelry that is conventionally associated with the other sex. Adorning oneself with such items denotes a simple shift in gender. Additionally, androgyny may be conveyed through the styling of hair, the use or absence of cosmetics, and other physical cues that denote gender-ambiguous qualities.

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Even in the absence of adornments, the body can be rendered androgynous through various means. Posture and poses, which are associated with one gender, may be used by the other to convey gender ambiguity. Traditionally, men tend to assume dominant positions that occupy space, while women’s posture typically conveys traits such as restraint, meekness, vulnerability, and delicacy. Physical aspects of the opposite gender may also be adopted, or one may engage in activities that are deemed atypical of their gender to achieve an androgynous state.7

The androgynous cista handles are primarily composed of figures depicted in the nude.8 Their ambivalent nature is conveyed through their physique and through subversive behavior. In women, a common expression of androgyny is an athletic muscular build paired with small, and at times, scarcely noticeable breasts. Their expression of androgyny can be subtle or, as is occasionally the case, the woman may possess a fully masculine body except for her genitalia. Female androgyny may also be manifested through one distinct feature of the physique being altered, such as large arms, a lean body, or muscular legs, instead of a combination of various characteristics.

Conversely, androgyny in men is accomplished through the reduction of masculine traits such as highly defined musculature. They may also possess one or more feminine attributes, such as a typically feminine hairstyle or curvaceous hips. Additionally, it is plausible for both men and women to exhibit a physique that is indeterminate and not overtly male or female. However, this is most frequently observed

8 See chapter two for an analysis of the cista handles in which the majority of both men and women are nude or seminude.
in divine beings referred to as Lasas, who frequently possess a sexless appearance except in instances where genitals are visible.\(^9\)

The incorporation of androgynous figures on items commonly associated with the female gender inherently establishes a correlation between these figures and women. Cistae, which are believed to be storage containers for female toiletry items such as combs, mirrors, perfume, jewelry, and makeup, were prominent items in the lives of their owner. This idea stems from the fact that they were frequently deposited as grave goods.\(^10\) Leslie Shumka posits that women employed cultus (dress and grooming) and ornatus (adornment) to construct a female identity.\(^11\) Pursuing this notion, it is plausible to conclude that beauty tools and objects from the toilet, such as a cista, could have been significant personal items for an Etruscan woman. Nonetheless, not all female burials contain cistae as a grave good, and it is unclear why some women's graves lack this item.\(^12\)

It is conceivable that the androgynous figures were also crucial to this funerary function, thereby explaining their inclusion on the cista. Figures that straddled the boundaries between male and female would have represented the boundary between life and death. Androgynous cista handles may have been indicative of beings that

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\(^10\) Somebody to love: gender and social identity in seventh- and sixth-century BC Chiusi; It is important to note that surviving cistae come from the city of Praeneste, a city located in the Latin territory near Rome. While Praeneste is not an Etruscan city, it is often categorized under the Etruscan umbrella because of the close ties between Etruria and Praeneste. Etruria no doubt had an influence on the art of Praeneste considering that the Etruscans had trade routes with the city as well as a large population that resided there. It is even possible the city became an Etruscan outpost, but there is no certainty about this. (See Bridget Sandhoff, “Isn’t s/he lovely.” *In Gender Identities in Italy in the first Millenium BC*, ed. Edward Herring and Kathryn Lomas (Detroit: BAR Publishing, 2009).


\(^12\) Sandhoff, “Sexual ambiguity? Androgynous Imagery in Etruria,” 71-96.
assisted in the transition to the afterlife. While ambiguously gendered individuals were likely situated on women's items because women were considered a more vulnerable population, it is also possible that their assistance extended to the woman's husband and children.\textsuperscript{13}

The Praenestine Cistae were luxury items, as evidenced by the use of bronze to create the container. This material would have been primarily available to aristocratic individuals, emphasizing the status and wealth of their owners. These handles would have reflected their owners' wealth both during their lifetime and after death when the object was deposited as a grave good. However, this limited evidence to an aristocratic Etruscan perspective, and it is difficult to determine the views of androgynous bodies in relation to the cista handles held by lower-class women, as the evidence does not represent them.

Due to the lack of written records concerning androgyny from the Etruscans themselves, scholars must rely on material remains and the views of neighboring societies, such as the Greeks, to determine how the Etruscans perceived this topic. It is crucial to consider contemporary influences because they likely shaped Etruscan opinion and use of androgyny. While these sources may shed light on how androgynous figures came to be and how they might have been received by Etruscan society, they cannot provide an exact understanding of androgyny in Etruria.

It is worth noting that Etruscan women enjoyed more freedom than their Greek counterparts in terms of societal mobility. Although biased, Greek accounts suggest that

\textsuperscript{13} Katherine T. Von Stackelberg, “Garden Hybrids: Hermaphrodite Images in the Roman House,” \textit{Classical Antiquity} 33, no. 2 (October 2014): 398-404; this possible function of the androgynous cista handles will be discussed further in chapter three.
Etruscan women had greater societal mobility than Greeks. The roles of women were less strict in Etruria, and women had more freedom to participate in society. Nevertheless, Etruscan women still had many of the same duties as their Greek counterparts and were primarily confined to the domestic sphere, while men took on political and civil duties.

Despite the rigidity of gender roles in ancient societies, a dual-sexed body was considered the ideal state of being reserved for the divine. The ability to embody both sexes or neither was seen as achieving a more powerful state. However, this ideal did not apply to real life, as intersex individuals were often rejected by their families and society. Additionally, effeminate men and masculine women were highly criticized by contemporary authors. Ancient societies may have felt threatened by ambivalent individuals who were outside of the norm.

**Androgynous Figures in Greek and Etruscan Mythology**

Androgyny and dual-sexed beings hold a notable position in Greek mythology, particularly in stories of the creation of the world. According to Greek cosmology, an androgynous being played a part in the origin of the universe, existing in a state that was neither entirely male nor female. Early in Greek cosmology, a being that was both male and female were so prideful that Zeus cut them in half. The story goes that the separated beings yearn for their other half and Eros helped reunite them.

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17 Bittarello, 211-233.
18 Aileen Ajoatian, 226-227.
The fourth century BCE saw a surge of interest in androgynous and dual-gendered figures in Greek art. The earliest known portrayal of such a figure is Hermaphroditos, who often appears with a female body and breasts but with the addition of a male phallus.\textsuperscript{19} Despite the pronounced female traits of his physique, his male genitalia asserts his masculine identity. Hermaphroditos served as a symbol of fertility and oversaw sexual union in marriage. Additionally, statues of him had apotropaic qualities and could be used to ward off the evil eye.\textsuperscript{20}

The god Dionysos, also known as Bacchus in Roman mythology, often exhibits an ambivalent disposition.\textsuperscript{21} Firstly, his birth defies the conventional biological roles assigned to males and females. After the death of Semele, his mother, Zeus took the unborn Dionysos and placed him into his own thigh, acting as the mother in this scenario. By giving birth to Dionysos from his thigh, Zeus took on a biological function that was conventionally impossible for a male.

Early depictions of Dionysos portray him as an older, bearded man dressed in Eastern attire. The long mantle that drapes down to his calves was deemed effeminate by the Greeks. Later representations of Dionysos preferred the appearance of a nude youth with longer hair and a plump body. During cult rituals, his followers would cross-dress, emulating the dual nature of the god. This practice was not uncommon, as gender ambiguity was frequently employed in cult contexts.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[19] Brisson, 42-50.
\item[20] Aileen Ajootian, 220-235.
\item[21] A handle depicting Fufluns (the Etruscan equivalent of Dionysos) will be analyzed for its androgynous qualities in chapter two.
\end{footnotes}
Myths featuring Dionysos frequently depict him in conflict with the Amazons, who also possess gender-swapped attributes. While Dionysos's dress is considered effeminate, the Amazons engage in traditionally male pursuits such as warfare. Both Dionysos and the Amazons became associated with the double ax, which became a symbol of those with ambiguous gender traits. The pairing of Dionysos and the Amazons in stories is likely due to their similarly subversive nature.\(^{23}\)

Even goddesses, such as Aphrodite, have been depicted with masculine features, as evidenced by the Cypriots' worship of Aphroditos, a masculine version of Aphrodite that possessed a feminine appearance, but also a masculine beard, erect phallus, and scepter. This worship involved gender mixing, a practice that Latin writers note was also present in old fertility traditions that featured gender unspecified gods. One such deity was the mixed gendered version of Venus, known as bald Venus, who lacked head hair, had both male and female genitalia, and held a comb. This figure was associated with the protection of all births.\(^{24}\)

Outside of the realm of the gods, the world of Greek heroes also had cases of gender switching. On Theseus journey to Athens, he had been mistaken as a girl by a group of workers because of his long tunic and long braided hair. He was able to prove his manhood through a feat of strength. The change from boy to girl to man in the case of Theseus could be a reference to the transition from child to adult. Gender ambiguity relates to the crossing of the boundary that marks adulthood. In the Athenian festival the

\(^{24}\) Delcourt, 27-30.
Oscophoria that celebrated Theseus’ return from Crete, two boys were dressed in girl’s clothes to lead the procession.\textsuperscript{25}

The hero Achilles also spent time assuming the guise of a young girl. Before becoming a full adult, Achilles traveled to the court of King Lycomedes at Scyros. He arrived here wearing women’s clothes, disguising himself among the young women, and was known as Pyrrha. Following the prophecy that the Greeks will only win against Troy if Achilles joins the battle, Odysseus goes to Scyros in search of him. He brings typically feminine gifts as well as weapons to offer to the king’s daughters. Odysseus orchestrates the sounds of battle and Achilles takes up arms, revealing his masculine identity. This scene correlates with the idea that androgyny relates initiation rites and entry into adulthood. When the instance of cross-dressing is complete, he is prepared to take on the duties expected of him. Achilles must alter his gender before emerging as a full adult man.\textsuperscript{26}

Even Heracles (Hercules) had effeminate episodes. Despite this, he was no less venerated for his manliness and honorable warrior status. After the murder of Iphitus, Heracles was sold to the Lydian Queen Omphale. Under this arrangement, Heracles performed heroic deeds for the Queen. The swapping of the sexes occurs when Heracles and Omphale switch clothing. Omphale dons the signature lion skin and club while Heracles dresses in a feminine tunic and head scarf. Omphale takes on not only his clothes, but Heracles masculine demeanor. He takes on the subservient position as

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. 8-10.

the queen forces him to spin wool and hits him with her sandal when his work is not to her satisfaction. 

In the Fasti of Ovid, another crossdressing story involves Hercules and Omphale, who exchange their clothes after dining in the woods. After retiring to a cave, they sleep separately to maintain purity before attending a ritual to honor Bacchus the next day. Faunus sneaks into the cave at night, hopping into the bed of the one in women’s clothing, only to be humiliated by Hercules. These cross-dressing tales, whether involving gods or heroes, are often associated with rituals and initiation rites into adulthood.

In addition, ancient Greek wedding practices also involved gender distortion. For instance, the priest of Heracles on the island of Cos cross-dressed during ritual sacrifice, which is speculated to be inspired by Heracles’ tale of taking refuge in a Thracian woman’s home, where he disguised himself in her clothes and later married her while dressed in a floral garment. Similarly, in Sparta, the bride’s head was shaved, and she was dressed in men’s clothing, while in Argos, she wore a fake beard on her wedding night. These practices underscore the connection between gender distortion and marriage rituals in ancient Greek culture.

The characters of Atalanta and Peleus, adopted by the Etruscans from the Greeks for artistic purposes, present further examples of gender ambiguity. Unlike the previously discussed figures, gender transformation is not a result of a change in attire but rather a shift in behavior. Atalanta, in particular, embodies an ambiguous nature by

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27 Ibid; Kampen, 242-243.
29 Delcourt, 20-22.
engaging in activities typically dominated by males and excelling at them. Her liminal state before marriage, during which she transforms into a fully realized woman, may serve as another instance of gender swapping in preparation for matrimony. The complex nature of Atalanta and its relationship to androgyny, particularly as portrayed on cistae handles, will be further examined in Chapter Three.

The preceding discussion has explored the significance of gender ambiguity in relation to marriage rituals and initiation rites in mythology. It is pertinent to investigate how these concepts were manifested in real-life practices. It was believed that individuals did not attain full adulthood until they underwent a ritual that symbolized their transition into adulthood. These rites involved adopting dress and participating in activities typical of the opposite sex. The rationale behind this practice was that it prepared the new adult to take on their respective responsibilities, namely marriage, having children, and for men, civic and military duties.

Bridget Sandhoff has recently engaged with the issue of sexual ambiguity and androgynous imagery in Etruria.\(^\text{31}\) She provides two possible reasons for gender swapping to become the method in which this important stage was completed. Firstly, the exchange of one’s gender can symbolize a person’s marginal status as no longer a boy or girl but also not yet an adult. This androgyny would correspond to a transitional state. The second reason takes a more psychological perspective. A child cannot advance unto the next stage of life without taking on the guise of the opposite sex. This

gives the newfound adult a perspective and appreciation for both sexes. After examining these rituals and related mythology, I find this second explanation less credible.  

Sandhoff’s research on Etruscan androgyny has led her to make several observations. Firstly, the Lasa, typically considered an Etruscan death demon, frequently exhibits an ambivalent gender nature. These divine beings are often depicted in scenes related to death, love, marriage, and adornment. Lasas may be represented as male, female, or having an indeterminate gender. However, what unites all depictions of Lasas is that they are winged beings.

Fufluns (Etruscan Dionysos) also seems to keep his ambiguity and stays close to how the Greeks characterize him. Individuals related to Dionysos, satyrs and maenads, also adopt ambivalent qualities. They are often being paired together when this occurs. Adonis, Aphrodite’s lover who is known to the Etruscans as Atunis, also takes on qualities of the opposite sex. Often, he is portrayed as her submissive partner and takes on a feminine posture.  

The Typical Representation of the Male and Female Body in Etruria  

Before delving further into this discussion, it is essential to establish the typical male and female form that is crafted by the Etruscans. An example of a fully feminine figure is the patera with a handle in the form of a female Lasa (20.01). Unlike some depictions of Lasas, this one depicts the posture and form of a fully realized woman. The Lasa has one arm raised above her head while the other cradles a horn in the shape of an animal head. Her upper body is slender and much smaller than her lower body.  

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half, which is round and plump. Her fleshy appearance is characteristic of ancient
depictions of women. Her legs are crossed in a posture that is tight and controlled,
which is frequently used in representations of women.

Another example of a standard representation of a woman as well as a man can be seen on the back of a mirror (21.01). The engraving shows a woman gazing into a mirror, flanked by a man and a seated woman. The man is identified as Peleus, the central woman Thetis, and the last figure is the nereid Calaina. Thetis wears a diadem, her hair pulled back into a low bun as she adjusts her hair. Her face is reflected by the mirror she holds. She wears a cape over her shoulders that outlines her breasts, and her genitals are just barely exposed. Thetis has a curvy, fleshy body, and Calaina's body is similarly structured despite being fully dressed and seated. Peleus is fully nude, likely mimicking Greek heroic nudity, with a lean, muscular body. His hair is unkempt and flowing away from his face, and he has strong abdominal muscles visible behind his raised arm. Peleus' frame is overall wider than the two women. Both the man and women in this scene do not employ characteristics of the opposite sex; their features and activities are standard for their gender.

The previous two examples are women's objects, and they make an adequate comparison to the androgynous figures on the handles because they are used in the same context. However, it is still imperative to provide an analysis of handle figures that are not androgynous. These handles that are in line with their given sex help highlight the fact that the ambiguous qualities are purposeful. I will compare handles of a singular man and woman of a similar type.
The first handle shows a woman executing a backbend (19.01). She is completely nude except for short shoes and wears a cap on her head. She has a thin body and noticeable breasts, with her slim torso widening significantly at the start of the hips and continuing through her plump thighs. The handle of the male executes the same pose, and he is fully nude as well (18.01). His body is flat and lean, with clearly carved out abdominal muscles. His sturdy legs are no wider than the rest of his body, and his shoulders seem to be the widest part of his body.

From the examination of the discussed objects, it is evident what qualities make up the standard non-androgynous male and female forms. Men are usually represented with muscular, sinewy builds, and their shoulders are the widest part of the body, usually with wider and more dominating postures. Women commonly have plump, fleshy bodies, with their shoulders smaller than their legs and hips, which are usually the widest part of the body. They do not have the same muscular bodies as men, and their posture is more compact and minimized, frequently giving off a submissive posture. The handles that I will be analyzing for androgynous qualities often minimized their gender-specific features or utilize elements of the opposite sex alongside that of their own.
CHAPTER 2. ANALYSIS OF ANDROGYNOUS CISTA HANDLES

In the late fourth century B.C.E., male and female androgynous pairs (both divine and mortal) became the preferred handle decoration for Praenestine cistae.\(^{34}\) This coincides with the rise of Greek influence on Etruscan art.\(^{35}\) Upon examination it is evident that these figures appear to take on features of the opposing sex: women with exaggerated musculature and men with the plump body that is often employed in representations of women. Both the standing pairs and the wrestling pairs mirror each other in bodily form and pose. The nude androgynous pairs work together to make a fluctuating representation of the male and female gender that is outside the rigid ideas of male and female.

**Wrestling Pairs**

Handles in the form of male and female wrestlers feature figures with a gender identity that straddles the boundaries of traditional male and female roles. These handles portray nude men and partially clothed or nude women locked in a physical struggle. Although their bodies are turned outwards, it is evident that the figures are preparing to spar. The partially clothed women are shown wearing a perizoma, a garment similar to underwear. On this type of handle, women are depicted either wearing this garment or fully clothed. In Etruscan culture, men commonly wore the perizoma while exercising or competing in athletic events, but they were not depicted as being completely nude as they are in these handles. Women were allowed to watch athletic competitions as spectators, but there is no evidence suggesting that they

\(^{34}\) Whenever the provenance is known, the cistae and their handles were found in Praeneste and its In the cases for which we have no certain provenance, their similarity with handles of definite Praenestine origin suggest that they were also created there.

actively participated in such events. Hence, it remains uncertain whether the women on the handles are represented as engaging in activities that were part of the typical life of Etruscan women or activities that were considered to be typically male.\textsuperscript{36}

A cista handle of this type, housed in the British Museum, portrays a nude male and a woman wearing a \textit{perizoma} in a wrestling stance (7.03). Their torsos are turned outward toward the front of the cista while their knees are bent towards each other in a lunged position. The outside arms of the pair are perched on their hips and their inside arms are crossed over the shoulder of the other. The two press their heads together. Large almond eyes that are out of proportion with the nose and mouth can be seen on the round faces of the pair. Both the man and the woman have their hair rolled back away from their face in a thick ring. The man has overly large ears; the woman’s ears are hidden under her hair.

The two bodies are reflected in stance and execution. The pair could be mistaken as identical, especially from the rear, if it was not for the \textit{perizoma} separating them. Subtle differences include the woman’s breasts and the man’s faintly wider torso. Both figures have muscular bodies and particularly strong legs. The bulk of the androgynous qualities fall on the female wrestler.

A similarly styled handle shows a fully nude man and seminude woman in the wrestling stance (8.01). This woman also wears a \textit{perizoma} as well as boots. Leaning on each other with their inner arms overlapped, the bodies of the pair face frontally while their inside legs are bent inwards. With their heads pressed against each other,

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{36} Bonfante, “The Women of Etruria,” 93.}
they each have a hand resting on their hips. The woman gazes outward whereas as the man’s gaze is directed at an angle toward the ground.

Both figures have a short, cropped haircut that lays like a helmet on their heads. The woman’s body as well as her head is larger than her partner’s. Her facial features are larger to match. She has a well-built upper body that showcases a lean muscular torso. Her legs appear strong and sturdy. She has breasts, but they are minimized. While smaller than the woman, the man is also muscular and lean. Both figures exhibit an athletic physique.

Due to her highly masculinized body, the woman could easily be mistaken for a man. However, her female identity can be established because of the existence of comparable handles of this type that focus more heavily on the woman’s feminine qualities. Additionally, if she were male, she would be fully nude like her partner instead of employing the *perizoma* to hide her genitals.

Not all the women of the wrestler type wear the *perizoma*. Instead, they wear a tunic. One such handle is housed in Princeton University’s Museum (9.01). The man is nude, which discussion so far has proved is standard for these handles. The woman wears a short tunic that has pleated skirt that ends at the top of the thigh. She does not have any other adornments. Both have the short helmet-like hair that is popular on these handles. The male figure grasps the right arm of the woman, and she hooks her left arm behind her head. The pair braces against each other with leg muscles engaged and their heads touching.

The right arm of the man is thin. It is abnormally executed compared to the rest of the man’s thick, lean body. Because of this, the woman’s arms are noticeably larger.
The forms of the man and woman mirror each other. Their faces are the same shape with their chins coming to a point. The features are clearly similar. Although the woman’s torso is dressed, it is evident that they are meant to be equally as burly. The woman’s legs are visibly flexed and at least as muscular as her partners. Their inside feet and legs are pointed toward each other while their external feet point forward. The outside leg is more tilted inward than the man’s leg. While the man is not overtly androgynous in this pair, his effect of his masculinity is diminished by the woman’s ability to match his physique and athletic capability.

This execution of the wrestler type is also popular. Another example is a cista handle from the British Museum (10.01). The pair grasp onto each other with the man’s arms swung in front of his body and the woman’s arms behind her head. Her left arm makes a prominent v shape. The two butt heads, creating a horizontal line. Their faces mirror each other in execution. They each have short wavy hair that is similarly executed except for a diadem on the woman’s head. Both figures face downwards, their upper bodies hunched while their legs are split into a stabilizing position with one foot in front of the other and knees bent. They create two large triangles between their legs. Each have their back feet perched on their toes.

Both figures have a well-built body. Because of the man’s fully nude body, the muscles are skillfully executed and clear. His shoulders are engaged, and his back muscles are delicately crafted. He has large glutes and thick legs. The artist has a good understanding of the human anatomy. If the woman has matching upper body muscles than they are hidden by her tunic. The tunic ends at the upper thigh and reveals her strong legs. The knees of the woman are more bent than her partner’s meaning that she
has to lower herself more to be on level with him. However, her body is slightly smaller. Overall, she is as carefully rendered as the man’s body.

This handle is one of the most naturally crafted of the wrestler pairs discussed. Although overly muscular than real life, it is well made, and the artist has command over how to craft the body. The man of this handle is more effectively masculine then the men of previously discussed handles because of his excessive musculature. The woman is not as overtly physically masculine, but her actions still give her masculine qualities and she is feminine through her inherent female body.

**Standing Nude Pairs**

The standing nude pairs face forward, each with one leg in contrapposto fashion and the outside hand placed on the hip. Both have their inner arm outstretched with a hand on the other’s shoulder. Occasional variations have the hand’s clasped instead. The pairs nearly mirror each other except for details such as genitalia or facial features.

An androgynous pair can be seen in the handle on a bronze cista at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1.02). The legs of the figures parallel each other with their left knees bent. The two are at arm’s length with the man’s arm crossing over the woman’s arm. The two figures have similar physiques; both the male and female are roughly the same height. Both are completely nude and lack the shoes or jewelry that are often included in these depictions. Small details distinguish between the two figures such as the way the hair is pulled away from the face and the narrower chin of the woman. The woman’s almond eyes, mouth, and nose are clearly visible. While her partners are features are more worn down, they are similarly crafted.

The body of the woman is not overtly feminized. Her breasts are minimized and are virtually unnoticeable especially from a frontal view. Her hips are the same width as
her male counterpart as well as her shoulders. Her torso is overall narrower than her counterpart, but she still has a strong build with legs as thick as her partners and noticeably muscular calves. Her nudity is not toned down by the addition of jewelry, shoes, or a perizoma.

Furthermore, the man lacks heavily accentuated male features that would separate him from the female figure. His abdomen is flat and does not have defined abs that are often seen on male nude figures (specifically Greek and Roman nudes and partial nudes). In contrast to the female figure, the nude male presents less noticeably androgynous features. Yet from behind, both the man and the women are nearly indistinguishable from the shoulders down. With their genitalia out of view, the androgyny is fully achieved. The pair occupy a liminal space between male and female. They represent both and neither.

Another example of an androgynous handle of this type comes from a Praenestine Cistae engraved with the Judgement of Paris from the Princeton University Art Museum (2.01). On the lid, a satyr and a maenad face frontally with the nude satyr on the right and the maenad on the left. Both figures extend their inside arm toward the other draping a hand on the others shoulder. Their stance is contrapposto with their hips pushed towards each other while their torso’s lean outward. They each have a ring of hair wrapped around their head. The satyr has additional thick extensions that drape in front of where his ears would be. He is slightly taller than his female counterpart but has a smaller head. Consequently, his facial features appear enlarged. The maenad’s eyes are smaller, and she has a plump, round face. She has small breasts that are visibly reduced when viewed from the front. A pair of shoes with a thick rim adorns the pair’s
feet. Both have wide shoulders. The maenad has thicker arms that are executed more accurately than the satyr’s arms.

When comparing the torso of the two figures it is evident that the maenad’s torso is slimmer than her partner’s, but both have lean abdomens that descend into wide hips. They each have strong, muscular legs of similar build. The lower legs of the maenad are shorter, more stout, and slightly thicker than his. The similarities between the two figures are even more apparent when viewed from the rear. The posture and bodily proportions make it hard to determine the gender of the individuals from this view. The tail of the satyr being the clearest way to separate them.

A cista handle housed in the British Museum shows a less overtly androgynous male and female pair (3.01). The figures clasp arms and are contrapposto with the outside legs bent. Their bodies face forward while their heads are turned to gaze into each other’s eyes. The man’s hand is perched on his hip while the woman’s arm hangs at her side. Both lean away from the other. The woman has short smooth hair that contrasts with the man’s thick halo of hair. The facial features of the figures are mirrored and rendered naturally.

Both the man and woman are similarly sized and appear to be of equal height. The woman has a thinner torso and overall curvier body, but the legs of the man reflect her curves. Both have largely undetailed torsos except for the woman’s small breasts that are hardly noticeable from a forward view.

While most of the androgynous characteristics of the standing pair handles falls on the woman, in this case, the man is the one who takes on more ambivalent qualities. His body reflects hers. He is reduced in height and is without strong muscular detail on
the torso. This cista handle is an example of a subtler expression of androgyny in these pieces of art.

Other Handles

Not all of the handles with ambiguous qualities fit the mold of the wrestler or standing pairs. Other popular handles include representations of Lasas as well as couples carrying the dead. Some handles that have been unearthed do not fit any standard type. This does not necessarily mean that they are unique, but the lack of discovery of similar copies may indicate that these forms could have been less popular. Nonetheless, androgynous bodies pervade these handles as well by the swapping of gendered qualities or the lack thereof.

Closely related to the standing pairs is a handle in the form of a male and female Lasa (11.01). Instead of having arms held straight out to the side and placed on the other’s shoulder, these figures reach their arms toward each other in a relaxed manner. The male Lasa is holding an alabastron, perfume container, and appears to be passing it to the female Lasa. The pair have nearly identically styled heads. Their hair is rolled in a ring away from the face and the facial features of the man and woman are crafted the same.

The male Lasa has a thin lean body that continues down to his shoes. He does not have accentuated muscles that would emphasize his masculinity. Outside of the genital region, his features are not especially feminine or masculine. The breast tissue of the man is emphasized and resembles small female breasts.

The female Lasa has a slender body as well. She lacks the plump hips and small shoulders that are often included in depictions of women. In fact, the widest part of her
hips is not as wide as her shoulders. She wears the same shoes as her partner and a bracelet on each arm. If the genitals of the Lasas were hidden, then the couple would have similarly indistinctly gendered body qualities. Lasas inherently have an androgynous nature. They are frequently depicted with a genderless body in which their gender is ultimately determined by their genitalia.\footnote{Sandhoff, “Sexual ambiguity? Androgynous Imagery in Etruria,” 71-96.}

One of the most meticulously crafted and well executed of the cistae handles portrays fufluns and a satyr (15.01). While most of these handles are meant to be viewed from the front with a less detailed back view, the Fufluns and satyr handle has a dynamic pose that invites the viewer to gaze at them from multiple angles. It is clear the artist is highly skilled and has a good understanding of the human body and its movements.

Fufluns stands taller than his satyr companion. The difference in height is emphasized by the satyr’s outstretched and bent posture. The satyr leans towards Fufluns, draping an arm across his back and over his left shoulder. His left leg holds his weight while the right leg extends backwards. He holds his right arm away from his body and grasps what remains of an unknown object. The satyr looks up at the face of the god who in turn matches his gaze. Fufluns leans back into the arm of the satyr and drapes his own right arm over the other’s shoulder. His left arm is delicately raised at his side. With his right leg, he steps forward while his rear leg is more in line with the rest of his body.

Both figures are incredibly detailed. The satyr has a mess of curly hair that just barely reveals his horns. His hair is dynamic and realistic unlike other handles that have
a helmet-like cropped haircut. Fufluns sports a more maintained hairstyle. His hair is swept away from his face and gathered in a bun at the back of his head. It is styled much like the hair of a woman. The satyr has a strong, sinewy body. His legs appear sturdy and engaged. Fufluns, on the other hand, has a thin, delicate body. He does not have the same muscle definition of the body. Instead, he has a fleshier appearance especially around the hips. Compared to the satyr, Fufluns has a much more compact posture. His lifted arm, crossed legs, and cocked hip give him a pose that would be far more expected if the figure were female.

Upon careful analysis of the cista handles, it is evident that certain qualities are associated with androgynous figures. Notably, these figures are often depicted in a state of nudity or semi-nudity, which allows for greater flexibility in adding or subtracting gendered characteristics. It is worth noting that while the number of ambiguous male figures is relatively small, they are less overtly androgynous than their female counterparts. In contrast, androgynous women are typically represented with a more muscular, athletic physique that downplays their feminine features.
CHAPTER 3. POSSIBLE REASONS FOR ANDROGYNOUS BODIES

The androgynous quality of these figures has been established; however, it is crucial to investigate why such double-gendered figures are prevalent on the lids of luxury toiletry items. The question remains of the function of androgyny in Etruscan art. It deviates from traditional representations of men and women in ancient art, particularly in Greek and Roman art. In both cultures, men and women were primarily represented with strict gender roles. Men were often depicted in athletic nudity or participating in male-coded activities, while citizen women were rarely shown nude, and they typically participated in traditional gender roles. In the Greek world, nudity was a way to differentiate between Greek and non-Greek, as well as between men and women. Unless she was a goddess, a nude woman was considered vulnerable or weak. This contrasts starkly with male athletic or heroic nudity.38

Female nudity in art existed in Etruria earlier than in Greece. Nude or partially nude women were seen in representations of breastfeeding or images of mythological figures. As a whole, nudity in Etruria seems not to have the same meaning as it did in the Greek world. They did not have athletic nudity, men exercised wearing the perizoma, and nudity was considered shameful or humiliating.39 This is to say that any actions performed on these handles would not have been done in the nude in real life. The choice to depict these figures in the nude is deliberate and likely a product of importing Greek types and imagery. Although they did not adopt the Greek view of nudity in practice, the Etruscans adopted nudity as an artistic motif. Beginning with

39 Ibid.
mythological heroes, images of nude figures increased with the largest number of nude figures being seen at the height of Greek influence in the fourth century B.C.E.\(^{40}\)

In her research on Etruscan androgynous figures, Sandhoff provides several reasons for these ambiguous bodies to be desirable to Etruscan society, particularly to women. The three main reasons that Sandhoff provides are that androgynous figures are symbolic of rituals related to transition, that they have an apotropaic function, and that they reflect trends and taste that arose in the fourth century.\(^{41}\)

**Ritual and Transitions**

The handles of the Praenestine cistae likely possess a symbolic meaning that relates to transitions and rites of passage. Etruscan nudity has been categorized into types, with death-related nudity being the most relevant to this discussion. As grave goods, the Praenestine cistae are inextricably linked to death. According to Bonfante, nudity functioned as a costume that symbolized the transition between life and death.\(^{42}\)

The metaphorical parallel between the nudity of death and the nakedness of the body at birth suggests a vulnerability in the shift into the afterlife. While cistae and other beauty tools have been associated with the grave, they also served a purpose outside of their funerary use. Women would likely have used these cistae during their lives, making these objects important beyond their funerary function.

Sandhoff expands the category of nudity related to death to encompass life transitions as well. These include events related to marriage and childbirth, which are important transitional moments in a woman's life. Marriage marks a woman's transition

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\(^{42}\) Larissa Bonfante, “Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art,” 543-570.
from childhood into adulthood, and her status in society is altered by it. The same argument can be made for childbirth, as some ancient societies saw it as the ultimate goal for a woman. Marriage was essential for building families, having children, and creating networks between familial groups.\textsuperscript{43}

Praenestine cistae and Etruscan mirrors often depict marriage scenes or related activities such as adornment, bathing, and relationships between couples. The decoration of these objects serves as visual clues and the transformation through beautification serves as a literal reminder. Furthermore, these important vessels and tools may have been gifted on important occasions. Beauty tools would accompany a woman throughout her life and beyond, even to her final transition into death.\textsuperscript{44}

Once a woman was married, she assumed many duties and expectations, including running the household, being a partner to her husband, and representing the family as a respectable member of the community. Motherhood was also expected of her. Cistae and mirror decorations may have served as a guide to beauty and seduction, leading to the transformational moment of birthing children.\textsuperscript{45}

Transitions put women into a state of liminality and vulnerability by crossing a boundary between life stages. The concept of boundaries was important to the Etruscans in both a literal and metaphorical sense, and they would have likely wanted to commemorate the crossing of these boundaries.\textsuperscript{46} The liminality of transitions would have been matched by the liminality of an ambiguous body. An androgynous body can

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{43} Sandhoff, “Transitory nudity: life changes in Etruscan art,” 52-59.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 62-63.
\end{itemize}
be seen as occupying the space between male and female and breaking the boundary between the two. In such a context, androgynous figures might symbolize life's transitions.47

The cista handles depicting wrestlers that may represent Atalanta and Peleus reinforce this argument. Atalanta's gender ambiguity places her in a liminal state. In her youth, she takes part in male initiation rites such as hunting, wrestling, and running. Female sports in Greece were limited and restricted to young girls before marriage. These competitions, primarily footraces, served as pre-marital initiation rituals. It is speculated that these competitions represent the unrestrained natures of young girls, which are reined in by their husbands. This was the outcome of Atalanta's story. Her masculine nature was subdued, and she transitioned into a fully-fledged woman when she was defeated in a footrace and then married.48

Rigid gender roles were subverted during moments of initiation. Young men and women took on roles of the opposite gender as part of the rituals in preparation for their adult life and marriage. It is argued that this took place because a girl was not a woman until she was married, and a boy was not a man until he was a warrior.49 Figures that embody this symbolic gender ambivalence would have been a suitable choice for objects meant to commemorate and memorialize these transitions.

47 Kampen, 243.
48 Sandhoff, “Isn’t S/He Lovely.”, 102-103.
49 Brisson, 61-64.
Apotropaic Reasoning

In the ancient Mediterranean androgyny often functioned as an apotropaic device, defending against the evil eye and malicious influences. Because of the strong influence of Etruria’s neighbors, it is entirely possible that their perception of androgyny had an apotropaic function. Etruscan androgyny functions alongside nudity. In Bonfante’s categories of nudity, one type is apotropaic nudity. The sex organs were considered a powerful force, and the revealing of them would have released their full protective potential. Malicious forces would have been drawn to these images instead of real people. Androgynous individuals may have been viewed as doubly powerful because of their dual-sexed features.

Apotropaic devices were typically placed in areas where vulnerable populations such as children, women, and the elderly could be found. This could be in a public or private setting, and the androgynous figures found on cistae may have been intended to protect their owners from harm. By drawing malevolent forces to themselves or scaring them away, the androgynous pairs would have offered protection. Given the cistae’s proximity to their owners and their perceived value, placing apotropaic devices on the lids of these items makes sense. Additionally, women’s beauty was believed to attract envy and the evil eye, so protective items on beauty tools would have offered protection in this sense as well.

Furthermore, apotropaic roles often overlapped with the protection of fertility. Androgynous figures were particularly associated with this idea due to their dual-sexed

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50 Bonfante, “Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art,” 544-545.
51 Sandhoff, “Isn’t S/He Lovely,” 103-104; Von Stackelberg, 398-404.
features. As marriage and procreation were crucial to the growth of society, promoting and ensuring these concepts was vital. A wife's beauty could encourage her husband's attraction and lead to a successful marriage that produced healthy children, benefiting Etruria as a whole. Apotropaic devices would have been especially important in protecting pregnant women and ensuring healthy births, as these were times of increased vulnerability for families. As cistae and androgynous figures have been found in graves, it is possible that their protective function continued into old age, defending women as they aged and ultimately aiding in their transition to the afterlife.  

**Fashion**

Androgyny may also be connected to fashion. Could ambiguous gender qualities have appealed to Etruscan taste? The Etruscans readily adopted many aspects of Greek culture, and it is not unreasonable to assume that they also embraced depicting androgynous individuals when it became popular in Greece. While androgyny was most prevalently seen in men in Greece, in Etruria, it is women who show androgynous features the most. Both sexes were suitable for showing ambivalent qualities and androgynous characteristics on women typically received greater emphasis. The emphasis on androgyny in women may reflect the desire to promote the virtuous qualities of women and downplay undesirable female traits. The depiction of androgynous couples in pairs may also reflect the importance of harmony in marriage.

The muscular female bodies depicted in Etruscan art may have been viewed as beautiful and indicative of reproductive health. The Romans believed that a masculine woman was more virtuous, and a woman with manly features would produce strong

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52 Sandhoff, “Isn’t S/He Lovely,” 103-104.
53 Ibid.
male children. A woman viewing an androgynous couple on her cista would have been reminded of her motherly duty and encouraged to not only be desirable but also virtuous. Ambiguous female bodies may also have been thought to reflect a healthy body. Discussion thus far has noted the importance of fertility for families and society as a whole. A physically fit body could have indicated reproductive health and future successful childbirth. A toned body would have been able to handle any difficulties that may have arisen in the procreative process.

The question arises: do these muscular female bodies reflect reality? The Greek Theopompus, in the fourth century, writes that Etruscan women are unashamed to exercise in the nude and alongside men. The validity of this statement is obviously questionable. Firstly, not even Etruscan men exercised in the nude. It would have been even more out of place for a woman to do so. Outside of such accounts, there is little evidence that Etruscan adult women participated in athletics. However, archaeological finds do provide some support for participation. Depictions of muscular woman as well as strigils found in tombs are the clearest material evidence for female exercise. While women may not have participated in athletic competitions, it is possible they participated in some small-scale exercises in order to keep a healthy body. Etruscan women overall had a larger societal mobility than their Greek and Roman counterparts. It is reasonable to believe that Etruscan women would have had more freedom and as previously mentioned, fertility may have been a strong driving force that led to the coveting of an athletic build.

56 Sandhoff, “Isn’t S/He Lovely,” 104-105.
Greek and Divine Models

As androgyny was represented more often popular in Etruria, the same was happening in Greece. Sandhoff believes that the Greeks first became fascinated with androgyny and transferred this interest to the Etruscans. The Etruscans adopted motifs and ideas from the Greeks, especially mythology. Both pottery and tomb paintings are rife with stories from the Trojan War. Handles of female athletes may possibly be a reference to Spartan girls who were known to exercise just as young boys did. Outside of Sparta, Greek girls only participated in dance and footraces in relation to initiation rites. I do not believe, however, that this holds any weight. There is currently no evidence outside of this similarity to support a direct connection between Etruria and Sparta. Additionally, the representation of Etruscan female wrestlers does not match the representation of the young girl athlete in Sparta.57

On the other hand, Sandhoff posits that the wrestler pairs represent Atalanta and Peleus, who were partners in a wrestling match for the funerary games of Pelias. The Etruscans imported goods from the Greeks that featured Atalanta, and the wrestling scene was especially popular.58 Atalanta was notable for her actions that contradicted her feminine role, taking on athletic and warrior qualities. She participated in male centric activities such as wrestling and hunting, but also emulates the qualities of a female ephebe.59 She remained a virgin, just like Artemis, the goddess she worshipped. Virginity can have a defeminizing effect on mythological women.60

58 Sandhoff, “Isn’t S/He Lovely,” 102-103.
The characteristics of the woman in the cistae wrestler pairs fit with the traits attributed to Atalanta (7.01, 8.01, 9.01, 10.01). In art, she is often given a muscular physique comparable to one given to a man and she often wore a *perizoma*. Although female, her nudity does not suggest weakness and vulnerability. Instead, her strength is emphasized. Her build matches that of her opponent and she is often larger than Peleus. Thus, proving that she is a worthy opponent for a man. Indeed, she indeed beats Peleus in the wrestling match.

Ancient literature frequently described Atalanta as manly, yet she was also portrayed as a desirable and attractive woman. Her masculinity did not hide her beauty. Is it possible that her masculinity would have actually been seen as beautiful? If so, the appearance of these ambiguous muscular women on beauty items makes sense. Atalanta occupies the middle ground between the gender binary. She has female qualities due to her biological sex as well as her desirability. Yet, her physique and activities align her with the masculine gender. She is the ultimate representation of a liminal gender, making her an adequate subject for these handles.

Sandhoff’s interpretation of the artistic motif in Greek figures, such as Atalanta and Peleus, as replicating Greek androgynous bodies is a simplistic explanation that can be pushed further. It is possible that the use of these mythological figures reflects a broader desire to depict androgynous figures in relation to the divine. The Etruscans likely adopted these figures not simply because they were copying the Greeks, but because of their androgynous traits, which fit into their ambiguous mold. The androgynous divine being may have had significant connotations for Etruscan women,
as they oversaw marriage and fertility, which were important aspects of women's lives and likely subjects of religious interest.

The use of androgynous bodies to form cista handles further supports this argument. As an item that women would have seen every day, the cista handles would have served as a reminder of the adornment process and beautification that women engaged in to ensure a successful marriage and procreation. This aligns with the qualities attributed to androgynous divine beings.

Chapter two of this thesis highlights a range of mythological figures, mainly of Greek origin, that feature ambivalent qualities. For example, Fufluns, Etruscan's equivalent of Dionysos, shares the same androgynous qualities as his Greek counterpart. On the handle featuring Fufluns and the satyr (19.01), he takes on traits that are typically reserved for female representations, such as his stance or fleshy body. The satyrs and maenads, who are related to Fufluns, are found on many handles of ambivalent pairs, and their rejection of the standard female role allows them to cross over into the male sphere. The changing of the body on handles of satyrs and maenads solidifies their ambiguously gendered nature.

The existence of an exclusively Etruscan androgynous divine being, the Lasa, prominently featured in Etruscan art, supports the possibility that androgynous bodies reflect divine models rather than being copied from the Greeks as a fashion statement. The Lasas, featured prominently on cistae handles and other women's toiletry items, are frequently depicted as having an almost sexless appearance and can be represented as either male or female, portraying many of the androgynous bodily features discussed in
this thesis. The Lasas’ connection to marriage and adornment aligns with the androgynous depictions found in other mythological figures.⁶¹

CONCLUSION

The discussion of androgyny in the ancient Mediterranean has primarily focused on Greece and Rome, with mythological figures receiving the most attention. While divine androgynous beings were highly revered, real-life instances of androgyny, whether through intersexuality or not, were often mistreated, and at times subjected to violent treatment, according to available sources. This thesis builds upon Sandhoff's prior work on Etruscan androgyny and highlights the importance of including the Etruscans in discussions on androgyny in the ancient Mediterranean.62

Our understanding of the Etruscan perspective on androgyny is limited. The cista handles, found in graves, have an unobjectionable funerary context that needs to be considered. Additionally, they are luxury items, which means that they may only represent the views of the aristocracy on androgyny. Due to these limitations, the perspective of the lower classes in Etruscan society remains inaccessible to us. Moreover, since cista handles are women's items, it can be assumed that women were the intended audience of the androgynous figures on the lids. The lack of Etruscan texts concerning androgyny leaves us without a key set of sources. Nonetheless, the investigation of these handles enhances our understanding of both androgyny and gender in Etruria.

Androgynous figures in Etruria exhibit the physical characteristics and/or behaviors of the opposite gender. Examination of the cista handle pairs reveals that male figures possess feminine traits, while female figures are endowed with masculine

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characteristics. Women have thick muscles and reduced breasts, while men have bodies that resemble their female counterparts and have pectoral muscles that mimic small breasts. In many cases, the man and woman appear to mirror each other, further adding to the fusion of their gender identities.

A significant connection exists in Etruria between an androgynous body and the divine. This thesis has expanded this link by focusing on the use of androgynous divine beings as models for cista handles. Etruscans may have wanted to place these ambiguous figures on cistae because of their dually powerful and idealized nature. While this explanation has been offered as a possible motive for androgynous handles, given the lack of any further evidence at this time, it is impossible to know for certain. Regardless, it is still clear that these figures and their androgynous form in art were important to the Etruscans and gives modern scholars a glimpse into the views of women on their society, gender, and roles.
CATALOGUE

1.01 Bronze cista

Etruscan/Praenestine, ca. 325-275 BCE, Height: 16 in., New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

This cista is in a cylindrical shape with engravings covering the body and lid. It is raised off the ground by three clawed feet. Each foot has an attachment in the shape of a crouching lion. On the upper half of the cista, three ring attachments remain. There is evidence that the cista originally had five more. The cista is missing a chain that would have been strung onto the rings.

The engraving on the body of the cista shows a conflict between the Greeks and the Amazons. This subject matter would have been transferred to the Etruscans through the extensive trade and communication between them and the Greeks. Amongst the Greeks, Hercules is seen battling the Amazons. He is identified by his lion skin and club. Many of the Amazons in the engraving are nude and one wears paints and a Phrygian cap. These garments associated with the East would have emphasized that the Amazons were un-Greek in their behavior. A laurel border runs all the way around the circumference of the cista.

On the lid, two sea monsters surround a dolphin. All are encompassed by a similar laurel border to the one on the body of the cista. A nude man and woman, each with one arm crossing over the other’s, serve as a handle. The bodies of the two figures nearly mirror each other. This is most visible when observing the figures from behind.63

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2.01 Bronze cista with engravings of the Judgement of Paris

Etruscan/Praenestine, ca. 300 BCE, Height: 16 ¼ in., London, British Museum

This cista is cylindrical and stands atop three clawed paws. It is made of cast and hammered bronze. Atop each claw is a kneeling nude female winged figure. On the body is an engraving of the Judgement of Paris and the Dioscuri. The nude figures of Castor and Pollux flank a nude winged female likely to be a Lasa. The rest of the figures on the engraving (five men and three women) are also nude. The three women are thought to be Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera. Aphrodite holds a wreath, Athena holds a spear, and Hera holds a cloth. Athena reaches out to a nude youth who is presumably Paris. The identities of the other male figures are unknown. Above and below the frieze are bands of palmettes and lotuses.

The lid is engraved with sea creatures: two seahorses, a dolphin, and a sea monster with a wolflike head. The handle is made up of a Satyr and Maenad, both nude. The pair have similar bodies except for their genitalia. From behind the tail of the Satyr is the best indication of the gender of each figure. The bodies of the two are not perfectly executed. Two noticeably unrealistic features are the strong definition of the transversus abdominus on them both as well as their crossed arms being noticeably too long.64

3.01 Bronze cista handle of a man and a woman

Etruscan/Praenestine, ca. fourth century BCE, Height: 4 in., London, British Museum

This solid cast handle would have been attached to the lid of a cista. The handle is formed by a nude male and female who are entwining their arms together. Like many handle pairs, the two figures here stand in a similar stance to the other. These two figures are differentiated a bit more than is typically seen. By having the woman’s hand dangle at her side instead of perched on her hip, the figures can be told apart without much effort. Overall, their bodies are executed in an anatomically correct manner, indicating that the artist was familiar with the nuances of the nude body.

4.01 Bronze cista handle of a Satyr and Maenad

Etruscan/Praenestine, ca. fourth century BCE, Rome, Villa Giulia

This handle is made up of a nude Satyr and Maenad. They stand in a mirrored pose with a hand on their hip. The most similar part of the figures is seen from the waist down. Their legs are rendered to the same thickness. The nude Maenad stands significantly taller than the Satyr. This is the most obvious trait that can be considered androgynous. The Maenad is less plump than most depictions of ancient women and the Satyr seems to make up for this by having his own fleshy body. Despite androgynous qualities, the gender of the two figures is made obvious through their anatomy. In the case of this handle, the sex of the figures could be determined even if the genitalia had been missing.
5.01 Bronze cista handle in the form of two wrestlers

Etruscan/Praenestine, fourth to third century BCE, Height: 4 ½ in. Width: 7 in.,

Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum

Two completely nude, almost identical wrestlers serve as a handle for a missing
cista. The two men entwine their arms and lean into one another. Except for small
details they are almost completely mirroring each other. These two figures are much
more alike than male/female pairs. This reveals a strong desire to make figures that
would mirror each other exactly. The ability to make these handles so similar, reveal
that the male female pairs (although often androgynous) were still given noticeable
qualities of their corresponding sex assigned at birth purposefully. Because cistae are
known to be women’s items, it is notable that two men doing a male activity would have
been chosen for this type of item. The reoccurrence of this motif, however, proves that
the male wrestler handles were popular alongside the androgynous wrestler handles.

6.01 Bronze cista handle of two wrestlers

Etruscan/Praenestine, fourth century BCE, Height: 4 ½ in., New York, Metropolitan
Museum of Art

The bodies of these two wrestlers are rendered much less realistically than the
bodies of the wrestlers handle that is housed at the Walters Art Museum. Their torsos
are thin and long. While the muscles are visible, overall, the pair seem to have a
scrawny build. This contrasts with the thickness that usually accompanies an athletic
body in art. The two wrestlers mirror each other in the front and the back. They lean into
each other, crossing their arms behind their backs. Each make a triangle with an arm.
The heads of the figures are larger than is realistic. The unrealistic traits on these
handles could be linked to a lack of understanding of the human body or lack of technical ability. However, the realism and execution of other handles proves that some artists do have the ability to render accurate details on cista handles.

**7.01 Bronze cista with scenes of the Trojan War**

Etruscan/Praeneste, 300-250 BCE, Height: 15 in., London, British Museum

This bronze cylindrical cista is engraved with scenes from the Trojan War. On the body are combat between Paris and Menelaus, Achilles and the deceased Penthesilea, and a battle between the Greeks and the Amazons. Above and below this frieze is an engraving of a palmette pattern that surrounds the whole cista. Engraved on the lid are four mythological animals.65

The cista is raised on three clawed feet with crouching lion attachments. Both the lions and the mythological animals on the lid indicate an Eastern influence. The handle is formed by a nude man and a seminude woman in a wrestling stance. The woman wears a *Perizoma* so that she is not fully nude. Nudity was used as an artistic motif that was adopted by the Etruscans from the Greeks. While the two figures are similar and the woman takes up androgynous, it is still obvious which sex each figure belongs to. Partly because of the *Perizoma*, but also from the genitals and breasts of the woman. The addition of the breasts ensures that the figure will be read as a woman, albeit an androgynous one.

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8.01 Bronze cista with handle of two wrestling figures
Etruscan/Praenestine, excavated at Caere, ca. fourth century BCE, Height: 14 ¾ in.,
London, British Museum

The cylindrical cista is lifted by three clawed lion’s feet. On each clawed foot is an
attachment of a kneeling Lasa. Surrounding the vessel are ring attachments. Some of
these are now missing. The chains that likely would have been attached to these rings
are also missing.

The body of the cista is engraved with gods and winged figures. A floral and vine
pattern are placed above and below the main engravings. On top of the lid is a handle
that is formed from two wrestlers. One of the figures is a nude male and the other is a
seminude woman wearing a *Perizoma*. The two figures lean into each other. The
woman is clearly larger than her opponent. Her hair and strong build designate her as
an androgynous figure. Her androgynous nature is emphasized by her participation in
male activities.

9.01 Bronze cista handle of a nude male and clothed female wrestler
Etruscan/Praenestine, fourth century BCE, Height: 3 ¾ in., Princeton, Princeton
University Art Museum

A nude male wrestler and a clothed female wrestler make up a handle that would
have been on the lid of a cista. The full clothing of the woman would have reflected
Etruscan anxieties surrounding the artistic nude body. The nudity of the man is likely a
product of Greek influence. Despite this female wrestler being more covered up than
other examples of this type of handle, her masculine qualities are still visible. She has
muscular legs that rival her opponent. Despite having masculine qualities, the woman is still clearly a woman, and the man is clearly a man.

10.01 Bronze cista handle of a nude male and clothed female wrestler
Etruscan/Praenestine, ca. fourth century BCE, Height: 5 in. Width: 4 ¾ in., London, British Museum

This bronze cista handle shows a nude man and a clothed woman in a wrestling stance. This handle from the British Museum is stylistically similar to the handle from the Princeton University Art Museum. The short tunic of the woman reveals lean legs. Her muscles indicate that she is worthy to participate in this athletic activity. The man in this handle embodies masculine qualities. He has a large, muscular body. Androgynous qualities fall on the female figure which is how androgyny commonly functions in Etruria.

11.01 Bronze cista handle of a male and female Lasa
Etruscan/Praenestine, ca. fourth century BCE, Rome, Villa Giulia

This handle is formed by a male and female Lasa. The two figures of this handle barely touch hands. The male Lasa is holding an alabastron and may be passing it to the female Lasa. Both Lasas have widespread wings which are characteristic of these divine beings. They have neutral, almost sexless bodies, a common way to represent Lasas. The genitals make the sex of the figures clear. Because of this, Lasas possess an androgynous nature. Their androgyny may relate to their divine status and the parts of society they oversee: death, marriage, and fertility.
12.01 Bronze cista with handle of male Lasas carrying the deceased

Etruscan/Praenestine, ca. 350-325 BCE, Height: 23 in., New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

This bronze cista is a large cylinder that is placed atop three clawed feet. Above each claw is a charioteer. The chains that drape around the cista are a modern addition meant to portray how the original chains may have looked. The main frieze on the body of the cista shows a mix of scenes from the Trojan War. The smaller friezes depict battle scenes, chariot races, and mythological creatures. Nereids and sea creatures carrying the armor of Achilles are engraved on the lid.

The handle of this cista shows two male Lasas carrying a deceased warrior. Lasas often are associated with death, so their presence here is understandable. All three individuals on this handle are completely nude. The arrangement of this figures calls back to depictions of Thanatos and Hypnos (Death and Sleep) carrying deceased warriors off the battlefield. These two figures are similar. The positioning of their bodies is parallel. These Lasas take on a masculine expression unlike the handle from the Villa Giulia (11.01).66

13.01 Bronze handle of two youths carrying a deceased companion

Etruscan/Praenestine, fourth century BCE, Height: 5 ½ in., New York Metropolitan Museum of Art

Solid cast handles of two nude men carrying the body of a deceased companion are a popular style of cista handle. The body bearers can be mortals (shown here) or divine (12.01, 13.01). The two standing men are parallels of each other with facial

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66 De Puma, 203.
differences distinguishing one from the other. On these mortal figures it is easy to spot the similarities between the two standing figures and the deceased body that they are carrying. The body is propped on its side in their arms. The body floats almost freely in the air as most of it is not supported by the hands of the body bearers. The horizontal body does not suggest the slumped weight of someone being held aloft. The posture of the deceased figure echoes the alive companions and if he were to be turned vertically with feet on the ground, he would appear alive. The artist of these body bearers may have reused a standing mold and placed it horizontally to create the deceased figure.

14.01 Bronze handle of two Amazons carrying a deceased companion
Etruscan/Praenestine, fourth century BCE, Rome, Villa Giulia

Two standing armored figures hold up the body of a deceased female companion to form this handle. The armored individuals have been identified as amazons because their warrior clothing is similar to the Eastern like garb that amazons are occasionally shown wearing. The two figures could easily be mistaken for male because no feminine physical qualities are being emphasized. They are heading under their garments. The femininity of the deceased body is less hidden. She clearly defined breasts and genitalia, proving her womanhood. She would have certainly been an amazon as well and her nude body is a costume that asserts her status as deceased. Unlike the deceased figure being carried by the deceased male youths (14.01), this woman could not be placed vertically and look correct. Although minimal, her body is more affected by the gravity of her horizontal positioning.
15.01 Bronze Handle of Fufluns and a Satyr
Etruscan/Praenestine, ca. fourth to third century BCE, Palestrina, Museo archeologico

On this handle Fufluns drapes his arm over a Satyr to created a triangular shape. The Satyr reaches over his shoulder while leaning towards Fufluns and Fufluns leans backwards. Both are gazing into the face of the other. The Satyr is typically masculine in his appearance. He has unkempt hair that reveals short horns that indicate his divine nature. The muscles of his torso are strong and clearly defined. As for Fufluns, his posture is feminine. His hair is neatly placed in a bun and his muscles are not well defined. He has a fleshy appearance, especially around the hips, hallmarks in the crafting of a woman’s body in ancient art. Fufluns embodies an androgynous state on this handle. This coincides with other portrayals of Fufluns and his Greek equivalent, Dionysos.

16.01 Bronze ovoid cista with female acrobat handle
Etruscan/Praenestine, ca. 300-275 BCE, Height: 11 in., New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Outside of the norm for cistae, this oval shaped cista is free of any engravings. Instead, it has a smooth bronze surface. The cista itself is mounted on four clawed feet. Each foot has an attachment of a comic theater mask. On each of the long sides, is a hinge that holds the lid in place. A bronze pin is removed to release the lid. The cista can be opened on either side depending on which pin is removed and if both pins are removed the lid comes off completely.67

67 De Puma, 206.
The handle of the lid is formed by a bronze casted female acrobat. This position easily lends itself to becoming a handle. She is nude except for shoes. Her body is executed in a typically feminine manner. The feet and hands act as the connection points between the handle and the lid. The elbows of the woman are facing the wrong direction to be a true backbend.

**17.01 Bronze handle of a youth acrobat**

Etruscan/Praenestine, fourth century BCE, Height: 4 ½ in., New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

This bronze handle is in the shape of a nude male acrobat. The backbend that he is performing creates a rounded form for a hand to grab easily and comfortably. The artist was likely familiar with the shape of the body during this acrobatic activity because it is accurately rendered. The treatment of the body on this male handle is similar to the female acrobat handle from the ovoid cista (16.01). These two handles lend to the possibility that a neutral body may have been created and the genitals were added to distinguish the sex of the figure.

**18.01 Bronze handle of a male acrobat**

Etruscan/Praenestine, fifth century BCE, Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum

This bronze handle creates a curved form by placing a nude male figure into a backbend. The nude body itself is not entirely accurate. The arms are more rounded than would actually be possible. The abdominals muscles are deeply carved to emphasize the athletic strength of the figure. His body takes on a typically masculine expression. It is lean and no part of the body is wider than another. From his legs to his
chest, he is the same width. This handle does not have a neutral or androgynous body. It was deliberately crafted into an idealized male form.

19.01 Bronze handle of a female acrobat

Etruscan/Praenestine, fifth to fourth century BCE, Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum

The solid cast bronze handle is of a woman doing a backbend. She is executed in the typical style of these acrobat handles. The acrobat is fully nude except for shoes and a diadem. She would have been attached to a cista by the floral brackets connected to her hands and feet. The woman has a plump and unmuscular body. She is thinnest at the waist while her hips are wider than her shoulders. She is representative of the standard nude female form.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Melanie Naples was raised in Bedford, Virginia. She attended Christopher Newport University where she received a bachelor’s degree in Classical Studies in May 2021. She entered Louisiana State University’s graduate program in August of that same year and received a Master of Art History in August 2023. She hopes to continue studying art of the ancient world in an academic setting.