

The Bronze Hut Urn in The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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ON A RECENT VISIT to New York I had occasion, through the kindness of my colleagues in the Department of Greek and Roman Art of the Metropolitan Museum, to examine the bronze hut urn (Figures 1–4) that was on exhibition in the room dedicated to Etruscan antiquities.

The urn,¹ constructed of sheet bronze, is in the shape of a hut with an oval plan and with vertical walls that slope slightly inward toward the top. A bronze strip, bent to an angle of nearly ninety degrees, serves to join the base of the walls to the sheet that forms the floor of the urn. The various parts are held together by rivets: eleven on the bottom, with large, slightly convex heads, and eighteen, with conical heads, along the lower part of the wall. A bronze molding attached with small bronze pins and incised with vertical hatching runs along the lower edge of the wall and the jambs of the doorway; similar moldings frame the door itself and mark the junction of the roof and the eaves. The trapezoidal doorway is surrounded on three sides by bronze strips fastened to the wall by means of eight bronze rivets with conical heads. Horizontal eyelets are attached to the middle of each of the two vertical strips, and a similar eyelet is attached to the center of the door by three small rivets with hemispherical heads; a long bronze pin with a conical head passes through the three eyelets, thus closing the urn. To either side of the entrance are vertical pilaster strips, each attached to the wall by two nails with hemispherical heads; each strip is capped by a rounded, capital-like protuberance tapered at the top. On the opposite side of the urn are two more pilaster strips, plain and without “capitals”; their position does not correspond exactly to that of the first pair but is determined by the rafters of the

roof. The roof is divided into four somewhat convex sloping sections by two pairs of rafters, front and back. The section corresponding to the doorway has for decoration the highly stylized protome of an animal with a smooth, featureless triangular muzzle and with two long, pointed ears or horns; on each of the two lateral slopes is a pointed, stalklike projection. The slightly overhanging eaves are sharply differentiated from the roof proper; they are attached to the walls of the urn by means of eight bronze rivets with conical heads terminating in spherical tips. On the ridgepole of the roof is a ship, made of cast bronze apparently fixed in place by ten round-headed rivets. The hull of this vessel is flat-bottomed, without a keel, high and curved at one end, low and with an articulated profile at the other; its sides, which curve upward toward the center, are each equipped with two anomalous, symmetrically placed cylindrical projections at the level of the waterline.

The urn was acquired for the Museum in December 1938 by Gisela M. A. Richter, who in the following year published it as the only example then known of a bronze hut urn.² Miss Richter's discussion of the object centered upon its most remarkable feature, the model ship on the roof, which prompted her to

A list of abbreviations will be found at the end of this article.

1. Intact, except for small losses on the left-hand slope of the roof and on the right-hand wall just below the eaves; dark green patina.

2. G. M. A. Richter, “An Italic Bronze Hut Urn,” *MMAB* 34 (1939) pp. 66–68, figs. 1, 2. See also idem, *MMA: Handbook of the Etruscan Collection* (New York, 1940) p. 2, fig. 3; and “Archaeological News and Discussions: Bronze Hut-Urn,” *AJA* 46 (1942) p. 138.



1–4. Hut urn. Bronze, max. H. 29.4 cm.; diam. of base 36.2 cm. (long axis), 31.6 cm. (short axis). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 38.11.14

attribute it to one of the towns of coastal Etruria. She proposed a date in the late eighth century B.C., a period characterized by the widespread production of bronze vessels; the object would thus be one of the latest known examples of an Etrusco-Latial hut urn.

In a 1943 article supporting the late chronology for the Villanovan culture proposed by Åke Åkerström, Axel Boëthius turned his attention to the urn, the authenticity of which he reaffirmed.³ He assigned it to the seventh century on the basis of its technique and of a comparison between the ship on the roof and the small Sardinian boats found in the Orientalizing tombs of Vetulonia, going so far as to explain the production of hut urns at this late date as an imitation of *antiquitatis exemplaria*; though this thesis is now largely obsolete, it is an indication of the inherently problematical character of the dating of the New York hut urn.

In 1967 the urn was shown in an exhibition of Etruscan objects from American museums and pri-

5–7. Hut urn, from the necropolis of the Osteria, Vulci. Bronze. Rome, Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia (photos: Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia)



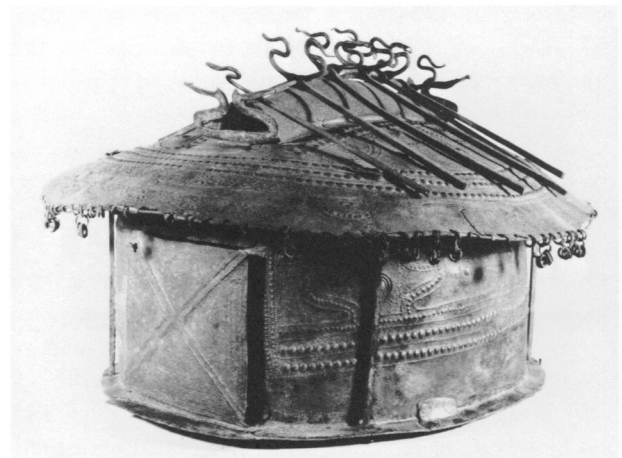
vate collections organized by the Worcester Art Museum;⁴ in 1969 Poulsen included it in his volume on Etruscan art;⁵ in 1975 Prayon, in his study of Etruscan architecture, mentioned it several times with reference to the structural peculiarities of its floor, walls, door, and roof;⁶ in 1980 Edlund, describing an

3. A. Boëthius, "Osservazioni riguardanti la cronologia del materiale villanoviano proposto da Åke Åkerström," *Eranos: Acta Philologica Suecana* (Uppsala/Göteborg, 1943) pp. 173–175, fig. 1.

4. R. S. Teitz, *Masterpieces of Etruscan Art*, exh. cat. (Worcester, Mass., 1967) p. 18, n. 1, ill. p. 107.

5. F. Poulsen, *Etruskische Kunst* (Königstein, 1969) ill. p. 2.

6. F. Prayon, *Frühetruskische Grab- und Hausarchitektur* (Heidelberg, 1975) pp. 99, 121, 122, 161, 168, pl. 77,2.





impasto model of a boat characteristic of the early Iron Age in southern Etruria, cited the New York urn as an example of the association of boats with osuaries.⁷ Thus the New York hut urn has fully entered the archaeological literature, despite the fact that it has never been subjected to detailed analysis.

As a member of a group of archaeologists engaged in a systematic study of the complete corpus of hut urns from the various parts of the Italian peninsula,⁸ I had acquired considerable familiarity with Etrusco-Latinal examples. When I was given the opportunity of examining the New York urn at first hand, it gave rise in my mind to a number of perplexities.

Another example of a hut urn made of sheet bronze (Figures 5–7) has been published since the ac-

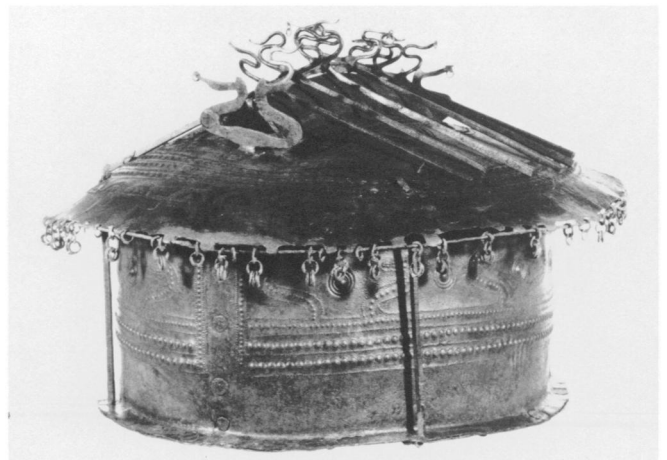


quisition of the New York urn in 1938; it was found at Vulci—the few objects belonging to the same burial were unfortunately dispersed—and is now in the Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia.⁹ Yet another piece, to all intents and purposes still unpublished,

7. I. E. M. Edlund, "The Iron Age and Etruscan Vases in the Olcott Collection at Columbia University, New York," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 70/1 (Philadelphia, 1980) p. 47, no. 26.

8. G. Bartolini, F. Buranelli, V. d'Atri, and A. de Santis, *Le urne a capanna dell'Italia peninsulare* (forthcoming).

9. G. Scichilone, *Nuovi tesori dell'antica Tuscia* (Viterbo, 1970) pp. 18–22, no. 9, pls. 4, 5; M. Moretti, *Il Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia* (Rome, 1975) p. 25, fig. 11; R. Bianchi-Bandinelli and M. Torelli, *L'arte dell'antichità classica: II. Etruria* (Turin, 1976) no.





8–10. Hut urn. Impasto covered with sheet bronze.
Basel, art market (photos: Palladion)

was offered in its 1976 catalogue by the firm of Palladion in Basel (Figures 8–10);¹⁰ made of impasto covered with sheet bronze, it can be assigned to Vulci on typological and technical grounds.¹¹ Although these two examples differ from each other, they present technical and decorative features that allow us to attempt a fresh analysis of the New York urn. The structure of the latter is more massive and solid, the sheet bronze thicker, compared with the examples in Rome and Basel and with seventh-century bronze vessels in general. Furthermore, two conspicuous elements, peculiar to the New York urn, permit a detailed iconographical analysis: the ship on the ridge of the roof, and the pilaster strips on either side of the door, with the evident allusion to capitals at the top.

The association of ship and ossuary might be interpreted as a reference to the profession of the defunct: one may recall—despite the difference in date—the Tomb of the Ship (Tomba della Nave) at Cerveteri,¹² where the painted ship on the wall has been taken to mean that the proprietor of the tomb was a sailor.¹³ The appeal of such an interpretation notwithstanding, however, it must be acknowledged



that the boat's structural and typological characteristics do not permit it to be placed satisfactorily in the context of known archaic representations of ships. It has only vague analogies with the impasto examples, sometimes decorated with bird protomes, from Villanovan and Orientalizing sites in southern coastal Etruria and in the Tiber Valley (Figure 11).¹⁴ Other elements are in contrast with the representations of

4; G. Proietti, *Il Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia* (Rome, 1980) pp. 36–37, nn. 13, 14; M. Sprenger and G. Bartolini, *Etruschi* (Milan, 1981) p. 80, pl. 6 (Eng. trans. by R. E. Wolf, *The Etruscans: Their History, Art, and Architecture* [New York, 1983] p. 76, pl. 6).

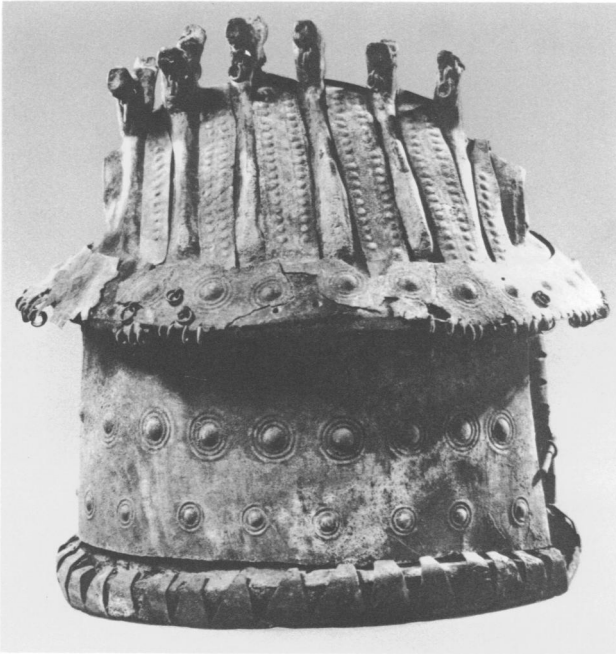
10. Palladion, *Antike Kunst, Katalog* (Basel, 1976) p. 8, no. 1. The only provenance given in this catalogue is a generic one, near Rome.

11. The problem of the chronology and provenance of hut urns made of sheet bronze, not discussed here, will be dealt with by V. d'Atri in Bartolini et al., *Le urne a capanna*.

12. R. Mengarelli, "Caere e le recenti scoperte," *StEtr* 1 (1927) p. 169, pl. L.

13. M. Cristofani, *Gli etruschi del mare* (Milan, 1983) p. 29.

14. For Tarquinia see H. Hencken, *Tarquinia, Villanovans and Early Etruscans* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968) I, p. 36, fig. 22c, p. 332, fig. 329c, p. 412, fig. 412; II, pp. 568–569, 584–585. For Cerveteri see I. Pohl, *The Iron Age Necropolis of Sorbo at Cerveteri* (Stockholm, 1972) pp. 133–134, fig. 111.4; and E. Pottier, *Vases antiques du Louvre I* (Paris, 1897) p. 29, no. C67 (in bucchero; formerly Campana collection, inv. no. 3082). For Bisenzio see



ships on seventh-century vases: comparison with the ships on the globular pot from Bisenzio,¹⁵ on Tarquinian oinochoai, on the plate of the type “with herons” found at Acqua Acetosa Laurentina in Latium,¹⁶ on the small impasto amphora from Veii (Figure 12),¹⁷ and on the fragment of an Etrusco-Corinthian olpe from Tarquinia (Figure 13)¹⁸ should suffice to establish the anomalous character of the model on the New York urn without adducing evidence from the sixth century.¹⁹

A sufficient number of representations of boats and ships—warships, commercial vessels, boats for fishing and transport—now exists for comparative purposes. Such coastal vessels and ships for longer voyages, for which the discoveries of underwater archaeology are beginning to provide parallels,²⁰ reflect an expansion of, and a technical evolution in, the art of navigation well suited to a maritime people like the Etruscans.

Returning to the model on the Metropolitan Museum urn (Figure 14), we may note that if we take the prow of the ship to be—as one would expect—the end facing in the same direction as the door of the urn, we find elements in sharp contrast with the above-mentioned representations. There the higher, slightly curved extremity is always the stern. We must therefore conclude that the boat was set in place on the roof of the urn with its prow—the lower of the

two ends—facing in the direction opposite the entrance. Decorated with a three-dimensional element, this prow is without a trace of the menacing ram usually represented at the waterline. The line of the stern continues the shape of the hull, which is flat and without a keel, like that of a lake-going vessel.²¹ The sides rise to a point at the center, a feature without parallels elsewhere, while the four cylindrical elements that project from the hull at water level, two

A. Pasqui, *NSc* (1886) pp. 143, 152; L. A. Milani, *NSc* (1894) p. 134, figs. 19, 20; O. Montelius, *La Civilisation primitive en Italie depuis l'introduction des métaux*, II (Stockholm, 1905) pl. 257, nos. 15, 17; and Edlund, “The Iron Age and Etruscan Vases in the Olcott Collection,” p. 47, no. 26. For Veii see E. Stefani, *NSc* (1928) pp. 101–102, fig. 7. For Orvieto see L. A. Milani, *Museo Topografico dell'Etruria* (Florence/Rome, 1898) p. 50. For Chiusi see *ibid.*, p. 34. A hitherto unpublished example for Vulci (Figure 11) is in the Vatican, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco, inv. no. 15329. For Capena see R. Paribeni, “Necropoli del territorio capenate,” *MonAnt* 16 (1906) cols. 445–448, figs. 54, 55. For Palestrina see I. Falchi, *NSc* (1887) p. 503. For the necropolis of Torre Galli, Ianchina, Patarini,” *MonAnt* 31 (1926) col. 189, pl. II, no. 13. For the recent discussion see Cristofani, *Gli etruschi del mare*, p. 18; see also S. Quilici Gigli, “Scali e traghetti sul Tevere in epoca arcaica,” *Il Tevere e le altre vie d'acqua del Lazio antico: VII incontro di studio del comitato per l'archeologia laziale* (Rome, 1986) pp. 71–89.

15. From the cremation tomb Olmo Bello 24: F. Delpino, “La prima età del ferro a Bisenzio: Aspetti della cultura villanoviana nell'Etruria meridionale interna,” *MemAccLinc*, ser. 8, 21 (1977) p. 477, n. 93, pl. xvia.

16. For a recent discussion see Cristofani, *Gli etruschi del mare*, pp. 27–28, figs. 9–12.

17. R. Vighi, “La più antica rappresentazione di nave etrusco-italica di un vaso dalla necropoli veiente,” *RendAccLinc* 8 (1932) pp. 367–375; *idem*, in *NSc* (1935) pp. 43–44, figs. 3, 3 bis.

18. J. G. Szilágyi, “Le fabbriche di ceramica etrusco-corinzia a Tarquinia,” *StEtr* 40 (1972) p. 66, fig. 8.

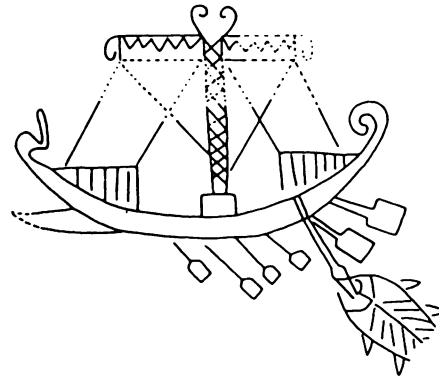
19. See, in general, S. Paglieri, “Origine e diffusione delle navi etrusco-italiche,” *StEtr* 28 (1960) pp. 209–231; P. F. Stary, *Zur eisenzeitlichen Bewaffnung und Kampfweise in Mittelitalien* (Mainz, 1981) pls. 14, 15; and Cristofani, *Gli etruschi del mare*, pp. 27–29, figs. 27–31.

20. For the large wrecks of Etruscan ships found on the coast of Provence at Bon-Porté and Cap d'Antibes see C. Albore-Livadie, “L'Epave étrusque du Cap d'Antibes,” *Rivista di studi liguri* 33 (1967) pp. 300–326; B. Liou, “Note provisoire sur deux gisements gréco-étrusques,” *Cahiers d'Archéologie Subaquatique* 3 (1974) pp. 7–14. An archaic wreck has recently been discovered near the island of Giglio. For a general account of underwater finds see P. A. Gianfrotta and P. Pomey, *Archeologia subacquea: Storia, tecniche, scoperte e relitti* (Milan, 1980).

21. This could be a fortuitous feature, however, due to the fact that the bottom of the boat was not intended to be seen.



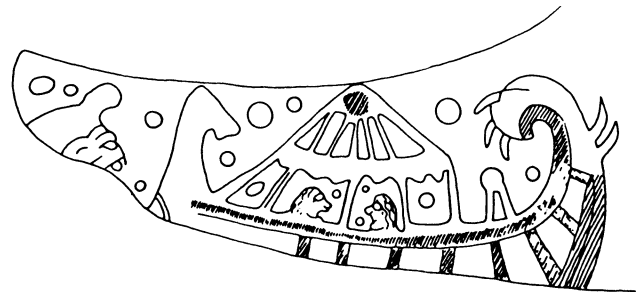
11. Model of a ship, probably from Vulci. Impasto. Vatican City, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco (photo: Museo Gregoriano Etrusco)



12. Representation of a ship, on impasto amphora from Veii (after: Stary, *Zur eisenzeitlichen Bewaffnung*, pl. 14/2)

on each side, are incomprehensible, defying every rule of naval engineering and nautical dynamics. The vessel lacks, furthermore, a mast and sail as well as any means of steering such as oars or a rudder.

Other perplexing features of the urn are the protuberances in the form of upward-tapering echini that surmount the two pilaster strips on either side of the door (Figure 1); these would constitute the earliest examples of “Tuscan” capitals ever discovered. Numerous hut urns with vertical posts around the perimeter of the walls are known, especially among the impasto examples;²² on the bronze hut urn from the necropolis of the Osteria at Vulci (Figures 5–7) the four vertical posts—which are arranged symmetrically two by two, as on the New York urn—serve to support the roof and do not merely allude to the structural elements of a hut. In no case, however, is there any hint of a capital. The posts are usually smooth, though occasionally they are knotty.²³ In some instances they are surmounted by projecting elements such as horns and/or protomes, facing outward. These elements are easily explainable by the fact that actual hut posts were made of wood; they might also represent devices used in construction, such as mortises, ties, supports for beams, and buttresses. It is precisely because of the extremely perishable material used in the construction of huts that



13. Representation of a ship, on fragment of Etrusco-Corinthian olpe from Tarquinia (after: Stary, *Zur eisenzeitlichen Bewaffnung*, pl. 14/3)



14. Hut urn in the Metropolitan Museum, detail of ship on roof

22. For the typology of hut urns see Bartolini et al., *Le urne a capanna*.

23. The best example is the hut urn from Tomb I at Campofattore: see A. M. Bietti Sestieri, *Civiltà del Lazio primitivo* (Rome, 1976) p. 81, no. 8, pl. viiib.

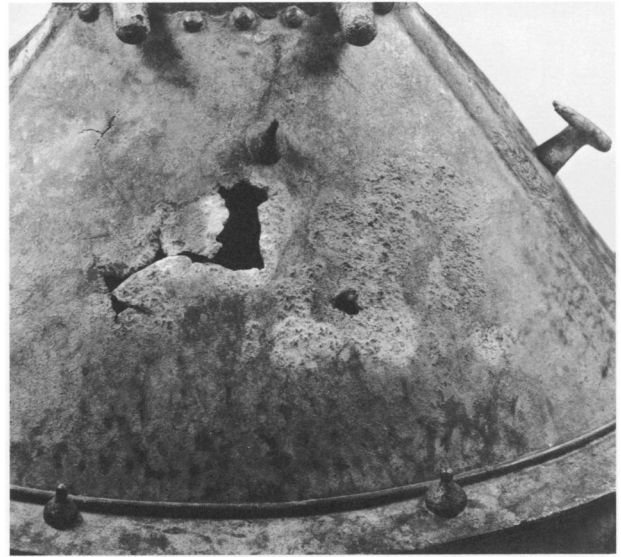
the earliest evidence of capitals occurs only with the appearance of more resistant and durable construction material, as well as with the further evolution of architecture.²⁴

These reservations about its two most distinctive features led me to undertake a more minute examination of the entire urn and this, in turn, confirmed my initial misgivings. I found, in fact, that the sloping sections of the roof were composed of an irregular series of bronze strips joined together by no fewer than fourteen solder joints, covered with a colored putty.

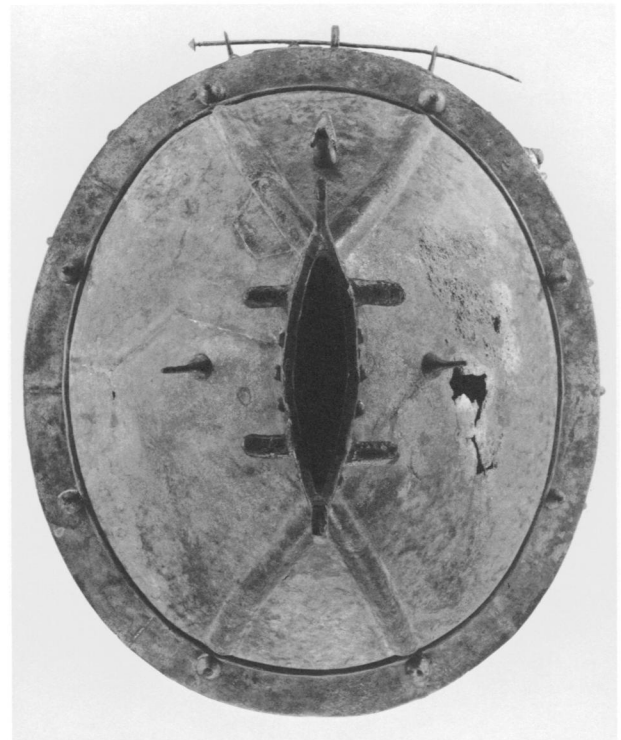
The bronze molding decorating the urn was not placed, as on the other bronze urns (Figures 5–10), so as to reinforce the eaves of the roof but was inserted, for no apparent reason, between the slope of the roof and the eaves, along the walls, and around the door. In its longest sections the molding is made up of separate parts held together with scarf joints and fixed to the urn by means of a series of bronze pins. The exterior surface of the urn, furthermore, is covered with small parallel striations aligned in various directions; these have no counterparts elsewhere. The small losses in the bronze, especially one on a slope of the roof (Figure 15), seem too regular: their edges are angular in outline, not uneven like the edges of the losses usually found on bronze vessels, and the thickness of the metal is consistent, showing no trace of the slow corrosion normally observed in conjunction with losses. The only oxidized patch, on the roof to the right of the loss, is extraordinarily regular for natural oxidation.

At this point in my examination, the urn's near-perfect state of preservation and the excessive use of rivets became suspect, especially since no trace of the rivets attaching the boat to the roof was visible on the interior surface.

24. F. Studniczka, "Das Wesen des tuskanischen Tempelbaus," *Die Antike* 4 (1928) pp. 177–225; P. Ducati, *Storia dell'arte etrusca* (Florence, 1927) pp. 88–101; A. André, *Architectural Terracottas from Etrusco-Italic Temples* (Lund, 1940) pp. xxii–xxiv; L. Polacco, *Tuscanicae dispositiones* (Padua, 1952) pp. 55–68; M. Pallottino, review of Polacco, *Tuscanicae dispositiones*, in *StEtr* 22 (1953) pp. 458–462; A. Boëthius, "Of Tuscan Columns," *AJA* 66 (1962) pp. 249–254; G. Colonna, "Elementi architettonici in pietra dal Santuario di Pyrgi," *Archeologia classica* 18 (1966) pp. 274–275; A. Boëthius and J. B. Ward-Perkins, *Etruscan and Roman Architecture* (Harmondsworth, 1970) pp. 43–46; F. Prayon, "Zur Genese der tuskanischen Säule," *Vitruv-Kolloquium* (Darmstadt, 1982) pp. 141–161, fig. 1.



15. Hut urn in the Metropolitan Museum, detail of left-hand roof slope (note the losses and the oxidation)



16. Hut urn in the Metropolitan Museum, view from above after a preliminary cleaning (note the modern soldering on the sides and eaves of the roof)

With a view to resolving these questions definitively, the Department of Greek and Roman Art in the Museum submitted the urn to a technical examination; this was undertaken by Richard E. Stone, Conservator in the Objects Conservation Department, whose report follows this article. A preliminary cleaning and X-ray photographs immediately revealed that the various parts of the urn were joined by numerous soldered seams in tin and lead (Figure 16), which had then been smoothed over and covered with colored putty. My original doubts were confirmed: the urn proved to be a modern pastiche, made from fragments of ancient sheet bronze (which had surely not belonged to a hut urn) reworked and combined, especially in the lower portions of the urn, with modern sheet bronze. The only original part, in

the final analysis, is the pin used to fasten the door (Figure 17): this may be included among the umbrella-headed pins of the Vadena type.²⁵

Translated by John Daley

ABBREVIATIONS

- AJA*—*American Journal of Archaeology*
MemAccLinc—*Memorie. Atti dell'Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*
MonAnt—*Monumenti antichi. Accademia nazionale dei Lincei*
NSc—*Notizie degli scavi di antichità*
RendAccLinc—*Rendiconti dell'Accademia nazionale dei Lincei*
StEtr—*Studi etruschi*



17. Hut urn in the Metropolitan Museum, detail of door fastened by Vadena-type pin

25. G. L. Carancini, *Prähistorische Bronzefunde: XIII, 2. Die Nadeln in Italien/Gli spilloni nell'Italia continentale* (Munich, 1975) pp. 268–271.