

BYZANTINE DRAPED FEMALE BONE STATUETTE

Byzantine, 4th century A.D.

Bone

H: 18.1 cm

Reference: 15129



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The figure was carved from a thin and hollow piece of bone, the slender appearance of which influences the whole structure of the composition. It represents an apparently young woman, who stands upright on a small and low, narrow hexagonal pedestal. According to a recurring type in Greco-Roman art, the weight of her body is supported by one leg (the right one here), while the other leg is slightly bent forward. The young woman is completely draped in a foot-length chiton, over which she wears a himation (cloak) that covers her two bent arms and her right hand; her cloak is pulled up over the back of her head, like a veil.

The treatment of the folds of the garments varies between the delicate and light linen of the chiton (tight and vertical folds) and the thicker wool of the himation (large, semicircular and more irregular folds). On the left side, many incisions indicate the edge and the fringe of the himation. The left hand crosses over the chest and with its elongated fingertips holds an oval object that appears to be covered with scales and might be identified as a fruit, perhaps a pine cone or a pomegranate.

The face is delicately modeled and displays idealized features, the gaze directed upwards, the centrally-parted hair falls on both sides of the face and is furrowed by deep but regular locks, partially hiding the ears. The woman's forehead is adorned with a crescent-shaped diadem. She wears sandals.

Typologically, this piece relates to a large group of female images whose first examples date back to the Hellenistic period (circa 300 B.C.), and that have been largely adapted during the early and late Roman periods both in large-scale sculpture and in minor arts.

Crowned with a portrait-head (of a citizen, but sometimes of a noble woman, or even of an Emperor's wife), figures of this type, appeared in many variations (position of the arms, arrangement of the garments, etc.), and represented both the simple woman and the Roman matron. It is difficult to precisely determine the identity of this small figure, of which only a few pieces survive in such fine quality. Perhaps it was a votive image depicting a goddess, like Demeter because of the veil, or like Aphrodite (the pine cone and the pomegranate are attributes indicating a link with fertility and fecundity beliefs): or, more simply, a priestess who is performing a rite. The statuette could have functioned as the handle of an object such as a mirror, keeping it closely connected to the female world; or an element decorating woodwork or a bed, etc.

The two closest parallels for this figurine are the statuettes at Princeton and Boston. They both date to the 4th century A.D. and would come from the eastern regions of the Empire (Anatolia, Syria).

CONDITION

The statuette is complete and in good overall condition. It has been reassembled (head, torso and perhaps the lower legs) and shows some restorations behind the head, on the neck and its back. The left hand, which was carved separately, fits into a hole at the end of the arm. The details are still clearly legible in spite of the surface's wear.

PROVENANCE

Ex-private collection; Christie's, New York, December 6, 2001, lot 654.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

KALAVREZOU I. (ed.), Byzantine Women and Their World, New Haven – London, 1976, pp. 86-87, no. 28 (Princeton, the Art Mus.).
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