

CAMEO WITH PORTRAITS OF PHILIP THE ARAB AND HIS FAMILY

Roman, ca. mid 3rd century A.D.

Sardonyx

L: 6.70 cm - W: 4.60 cm

Reference: 32966



This rare and historically significant gemstone depicting Philip the Arab and his family follows the long-standing tradition of Roman emperors immortalized by such carved cameos, which also served as luxurious works of art. Philip I, known by his imperial title as Marcus Julius Philippus, ruled from 244 to 249 A.D. Born in Syria, then part of the Roman province of Arabia, Philip became a major figure in the Roman empire after the death of Gordian III. Among early Christian writers he is known to have been sympathetic to Christianity. He is also known to have quickly negotiated peace with Sassanian Empire soon after the death of his predecessor. During his reign that the millennium celebration of Rome occurred, as it was founded according to tradition by Romulus in 753 B.C.

Left of center on the cameo, Philip faces his wife, Otacilia (Marcia Otacilia Severa), the daughter of a Roman governor. Married in 234 A.D., they had three children. They are flanked by two of them, Philip II (Marcus Julius Philippus Severus) at the left, and at the right, their daughter, Julia Severa, also known as Severina. Appropriately dressed as a "soldier emperor," the laureate bust of a bearded Philip wears a paludamentum fastened at the right shoulder, under which his tunic is visible. His son, Philip II, is beardless and crowned with rounded diadem, which may allude to the young son being nominated by his father as Caesar and heir, just as Otacilia was proclaimed Augusta. The empress is appropriately adorned with earrings and a necklace and wears a melon-like coiffeur with ringlets of hair hanging down at the back of her neck. At the right Julia Severa is wrapped in a cloak and unadorned, but with her hair arranged to hang in heavy ringlets at the side and back of her head. Images of all four individuals are attested by the coinage of the period. One of the closest parallels to the format of this cameo of Philip the Arab and his family (not including Julia Severa), is the British Museum's oval bronze seal bearing similar busts

of Philip, Otacilia, and Philip II with the figure of Jupiter Serapis (BM 1866.0804.2).

Like this cameo of Philip the Arab and Family, multicolored gemstones cut in relief were often made from sardonyx, a type of multi-layered agate. The first examples appear at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the third centuries B.C. Gem-carvers chose from Arabian sardonyx in which blues and blacks are predominant, or from Indian sardonyx, like this example, which combined white and yellow with red-browns. Alexandria in Egypt is considered to be the source of the first cameos as it is from this city that the earliest known and famous gems originated. The cameos with portraits of Ptolemy II and Arsinoë, now in St. Petersburg and Vienna, were made by Greek masters at the Alexandrian court of the Ptolemies. While intaglio gems were used for seals, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods the cameo became an object of luxury, as they could be used to adorn vessels and garments or be set in jewelry of the emperor and the Imperial court.

While Romans called every polished stone a gem (Latin *gemma*, a gem or bud), the word cameo is used to describe carved stones with an image carved in relief as opposed to intaglio. The cameo's high standing and rarity among carved gemstones, particularly those depicting Imperial portraits or scenes, lies with the stone's polychromy and the ability of master gem carvers to achieve the illusion of depth and perspective within a relatively narrow field of carving. The art of creating cameos, therefore, demanded an extraordinary degree and skill and perseverance. Carving used the same tools as those for intaglio seals, but like most minerals utilized in glyptics, sardonyx is harder than metal and therefore the stone was not directly carved by a

metal edge but with the assistance of abrasives. The image was painstakingly created, very slowly, and the making of a cameo could take many months. Besides the challenging hardness of the stone, it was essential to determine in advance the sequence of layers of the multicolored stone, which did not always run parallel and could change in thickness.

CONDITION

Completely preserved; reassembled from three fragments; few fractures (across the necks and shoulders of the son, Philip, and Otacilia) and few chips at the back side.

PROVENANCE

Formerly, Emma Frelinx (1884-1967) private collection, Brussels, Belgium.

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