

## EGYPTIAN FAIENCE FIGURAL SUPPORT OF AN INCENSE BURNER OR LAMP

Egyptian, Ptolemaic Period (end of the 3rd-2nd century B.C.)

Faience

H : 18.5 cm

Reference: 14294



reference 14294

This support, made of an extremely thin faience, is cylindrical in shape and tapers upward. The upper part, now lost, would have probably been completed with a small circular plate intended to support an incense burner or oil lamp. The body of the vessel bears a decoration in high relief (the figures were modeled separately and then applied to the smooth surface of the support), which is divided into three stacked friezes whose height decreases from the bottom. Each frieze is framed by a thin cornice, below there is a decorative band with several finely incised figures. Storage conditions no longer enable us to identify precise scenes, but one can still discern draped, and sometimes winged, figures running or dancing, that emerge from the background highlighted in blue.

The upper frieze is composed of winged children (Erotes) with chubby bodies either nude or wrapped in their cloaks. They seem to perform a lively dance, while playing the zither and the double flute. The central frieze depicts a Greek banquet where each couch, provided with molded feet, includes a cushion and a plain or pleated drapery adorned with a checkerboard pattern. Six guests, wearing crowns on their heads, are reclined on five couches. One couch displays a man talking to a woman, with his arm around her shoulder, while she simply sits on the edge of the couch with her cloak slipped from her shoulders to her hips. The next couch depicts a man raising a rhyton and turning to the left to discuss with the woman holding a cup on the neighboring couch. Her hairstyle is special, since she sports a Nubian wig with large locks. Another couch has a guest raising his right arm, accompanied by a monkey which is visible between the folds of his cloak and the last guest might be a musician since a zither is suspended behind him in the background.

The last frieze, in the lower part, features the three most unusual and enigmatic scenes. A rider defeats a naked opponent, whose oval shield has been thrown on the ground and the enemy begs for mercy with his

arm raised. The rider is dressed in a Greek breastplate, but wears the Egyptian nemes and atef crown and brandishes a weapon, which is not a spear or a sword, but a beam of lightning, that is to say a Zeus thunderbolt. Further away there is a woman, wearing an Attic helmet and armed with a round shield and a long-handled ax, marching against a lion, which is standing on its hind legs and is already under attack by a dog. The woman simply wears a short tunic that reveals one of her breasts. Behind the lion appears a war chariot with two horses at full gallop led by a winged figure who can be identified as Nike, the Greek personification of Victory.

This support, whose interpretation remains obscure, is quite unique in its genre. Although the style and iconography are confidently Greek, the material, faience, refers to Egypt, where it was a distinctive feature. Other elements of this piece recall Egypt and its age-old culture, such as the Nubian hairstyle of a guest, the small monkey and, especially, the nemes and the atef crown of the rider which chronologically date this object to the Ptolemaic period, between the late 3rd and 2nd century B.C. In this context, the rider might probably be identified with a pharaoh (Alexander himself or a Ptolemy). As a hypothesis, one could imagine that this support would commemorate the victory of Arsinoe III and Ptolemy IV against the Seleucid troops in 217 B.C., at Raphia, which would justify the presence of Nike on her chariot. The iconography of the Pharaoh (Ptolemy IV here) would refer to the old Egyptian custom of representing the sovereign defeating his enemy, like Horus defeating Seth, but armed with the thunderbolt. The female figure attacking a lion would be an Artemis/Isis, who would, in this situation, glorify the military talents of Arsinoe III, present on the battlefield of Raphia. Generally speaking, the decorative profusion and extreme quality of the workmanship are the striking features of this object, and make it a prestigious, luxury item, which was probably used at official banquets or offered as an ex-voto in a large shrine.

CONDITION

The object is incomplete and was reassembled from large fragments.  
There are traces of light and dark blue glaze mostly visible on the  
miniature friezes.

## PROVENANCE

Acquired in Germany in 2001.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Catalogue du Musée gréco-romain d'Alexandrie, (Paris, 2000), (see  
mostly pp. 97 ff . ; no. 406, p. 294).