

EGYPTIAN FAIENCE HIPPOPOTAMUS

Egyptian, 6th-4th century B.C.)

Faience

L : 18 cm

Reference: 24940



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Typologically, this piece continues the series of hippos in the round that has a very long tradition in Egyptian iconography and which reached its acme with the famous funerary figurines of the Middle Kingdom (see (2) and (3)), but which is also attested with many examples of the second half of the 2nd millennium. In more recent times (1st millennium) this pachyderm is, however, generally associated with the goddess Thoeris (see (47, 48, 49, 50)), while statuettes of this type and size seem to disappear. Faience figurines, smaller in size but representing this animal, appeared between the 7th and the 6th century in the iconographic panorama of the Eastern Greek world: certainly influenced by Egyptian art and provided with suspension rings, they might have served as amulets.

Although this animal can confidently be identified as a hippopotamus, the proportions and shape of certain parts of its body (the legs are rather short, and the neck is thin and long, while the modeling of the body and croup more faithfully represents a hippo) are different from the statuettes of the Middle Kingdom, because the artist might have wanted to depict a baby or a young animal, rather than an adult: he thus copied a famous subject, but treated it in a particular way. The use of frit for the manufacture of large-sized statuettes or vessels (see (83)) is uncommon, but attested during the Late Period by a number of objects, among which may be included images of Bes (Cleveland, Mus. of Art; Miho Museum, in Japan) or the hollow figure of a lion (Louvre), whose head only is preserved: it would have been part of a rhyton and reached the same size as our example. After the Persian conquest in 525 B.C., the Achaemenid kings became the new pharaohs and transformed Egypt into a satrapy (with Cyprus and Phoenicia, Egypt formed the sixth satrapy of the Persian Empire). Historically, this was a turbulent period, but it was artistically very rich, characterized both by the mixture of foreign styles, like in the Saite period, and by a return to the traditions of the past, perfectly exemplified by this hippo.

CONDITION

Except for minor cracks, the statuette is complete and in remarkable condition. The surface is slightly worn, but still shows many traces of modeling and polishing: after having molded the hippopotamus, the potter finished the figure like a sculptor, by rounding the volumes and incising many anatomical elements. No trace of painted details is visible.

PROVENANCE

Acquired by M. Sleiman Aboutaam, in London, in 1981, and in the family collection since then.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

On faience production in the Persian period:

CAUBET A. (ed.), *Faïences de l'Antiquité. De l'Égypte à l'Iran* (Paris, 2005), pp. 153 ff (p. 156, fig. 416 for the head of the statuette in the Louvre)

For frit representations of Bes:

FRIEDMAN, F. D. (ed.), *Gifts of the Nile: Ancient Egyptian Faience*, exh. cat., Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence (London, 1998), pp. 108 and 209, no. 73 (Bes, Cleveland)

GOLDSTEIN S. M. (ed.), *Ancient Glass* (Miho Museum) (Shigaraki, 2001), pp. 32 and 192, no. 23.