

GRECO-ROMAN BRONZE STATUETTE REPRESENTING ISIS-FORTUNA

Greek-Hellenistic, 1st - 2nd Century A.D.

Bronze

H: 18.4 cm

Reference: 4518



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The woman represented mixes typical elements of two major figures in the Hellenistic and mostly Roman religious world, Isis and Fortuna: the general pose and the modius (the tall cylindrical headgear) are typical attributes of Fortuna, while the clothing, especially the knot on the breast, characterize images of the Egyptian goddess.

The young woman is represented in a "classic" attitude: she is standing upright, her body resting on her advancing left leg, while the right foot is placed slightly backwards and raised from the ground. The right arm falls close to the body: according to the position of the hand, she was probably holding a large circular object that can be identified as a rudder, that is to say, the instrument that Fortuna used to drive human lives. In her usual iconography, the left arm descended along the body and the right held a cornucopia (a horn of plenty filled with fruits of the earth). She wears a long floor-length chiton and a thick himation that passes twice around her body and terminates on her right shoulder in a knot and fringe. The fabrics, made from different fibers, are furrowed by countless varied folds (horizontal, vertical, triangular, curved, etc.) which enliven the composition. The hairstyle – with the wavy locks on the forehead that are gathered in the back to form a bun, while long twisted braids fall on the shoulders and on the back – recalls Greco-Egyptian statues of the goddess of fertility. The face of this woman is youthful and idealized, without any wrinkles or lines precisely indicating her age: she raises her head and her gaze is lost in the distance. Although being of good artistic quality, our example reproduces in a somewhat mechanical way well-known schemes: its peculiarity is the presence of the modius, since Isis-Fortuna almost always wears an elaborate composite headdress, called the basileion.

Isis was an Egyptian deity, but her worship and her myths spread through the Mediterranean basin from the Ptolemaic period onward

before being largely accepted and practiced also in the Roman world, to the point that it can be found in all classical mythology manuals. Here the goddess appears with Hellenistic stylistic features (face, treatment of the fabric folds, hairstyle). A syncretic and polymorphic deity, Isis in the Greco-Roman world becomes a sort of natural and universal feminine principle, combining features of Aphrodite, Demeter and Artemis; she reigned together over the sea and the world of the dead and was the protector of the city of Alexandria. Her multiple facets justify the epithet of myrionym, "of ten thousand names" or "whose manifold names are unknown" which is sometimes attributed to her.

Here, the great Egyptian deity appears in her most popular syncretistic form, the one which relates her to Tyche/Fortuna, the Greco-Roman personification of fortune and chance (???? in Greek, Fortuna for the Romans). Unknown from the Homeric poems, Fortuna gains importance over the centuries and becomes an omnipotent deity in Hellenistic and Roman times: she was the protector of a city's destiny (each city had her Tyche wearing a wall-shaped crown on her head), but at the same time, she could toy with the lives of mortals with her rudder or by bouncing a ball.

CONDITION

The statuette is in a very good overall state of preservation, but the left arm and its attribute are lost. The dark brown surface of the bronze still retains areas of green patina. Cast using the lost wax process, it is hollow, but now full of sand; the arms were made separately and attached under the edge of the chiton.

PROVENANCE

Sotheby's London, December 14th 1995, lot 116.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (LIMC), vol. V, Zurich, 1997, s.v. Isis, pp. 784 ff.

Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (LIMC), vol. VIII, Zurich, 1997, s.v. Tyche and Tyche / Fortuna, pp. 115-141.

Sotheby's New York, December 17th, 1996. Lot 77