

GRIFFIN PROTOME

Greek, Orientalizing Period, second quarter of the 7th century B.C.

Bronze

H: 23 cm (9.0 in)

Reference: 18825



This spectacular and extremely rare hammered bronze griffin protome is one of the finest examples of its type known. This head would have been part of a group of identical griffin protomes (decorative elements in the shape of heads, usually animal, sometimes human) that would have been placed around the edge of a circular bronze cauldron. Hammered from a single sheet of bronze in a display of technical virtuosity, this griffin features all of the elements of the canonical Orientalizing type: scaly head and neck, tall narrow ears and wide-open sharply curved beak with protruding tongue.

Long spiral curls engraved with short horizontal strokes along their length fall to either side of the S-curved neck. Stylized wrinkles adorn the lids of wide elegant eyes that were left hollow for the addition of inlays in stone or glass, and a topknot crowns the head. This griffin sports additional circular protrusions on the center of the forehead and at the temples as well as a rosette at the back of the neck. Numerous details of the face and anatomy have been engraved: hatching and pinpricks to highlight the contours of the eyes, beak and tongue and U-shaped incisions to further highlight the shape of the lightly modeled scales, which alternate between being smooth and dotted with pinpricks. Both the hammered and cast variety of griffin protomes usually measure under 30 cm tall, with this particular example being slightly larger than average.

The griffin was a mythological beast – lion's body, snake's neck and tongue, eagle's head and hare's ears – with apotropaic properties thought to have originated in the Near East. First introduced to the Greeks during the Orientalizing period, the griffin enjoyed prolonged popularity, even into Medieval times. The hammered bronze technique was brought to mainland Greece during the 8th century B.C. at the end of the Geometric period through trade contacts with the Levant and Asia Minor. Many theories exist as to how exactly this occurred. Archaeologists still know relatively little about the Orientalizing period,

but most believe that through the development of trade in goods and raw materials, particularly tin, Greek artisans came into contact with Near Eastern iconography, techniques and materials and assimilated them into their own culture. G. Kopke has even suggested that Orientalizing bronzes were the result of Phoenician or North Syrian craftsmen living in Greece as traveling artisans from whom the Greeks then learned new methods and motifs.

A model for the protome would have been carved first, probably out of wood, with the sheet bronze then being applied and hammered onto it. This mode of construction would help to explain the generally rounder shapes present in the few hammered griffin protomes known; it would have been much easier to hollow cast sharp, thin forms with the use of a mold rather than dealing with how to remove a wood model from the insides of such small crevices. To create the smaller elements such as the topknot and the ears, the bronzesmith may have hammered those areas first onto segmented models to allow for easier removal before completion of the rest of the head.

U. Jantzen, in his seminal study of griffin vessels, *Griechische Greifenkessel*, categorized griffin protomes into groups based on chronology and technique: our example belongs to Group 3, dating from ca. 700 – 670/50 B.C. which includes both hammered or cast griffins, with the hammered examples originating mostly from mainland Greece, notably Olympia. The modeling of our griffin shows much greater finesse than the earliest hammered works – mostly from the islands, such as Samos or Rhodes – while the elaborate cold engraving of the scales is a precursor to their more extensive treatment on the later cast examples. The hammered protomes from Group 3, including our griffin, seem to be almost exclusively from Olympia, the site of one of the most important bronze workshops from antiquity (thanks to the thriving sanctuary complex that existed to feed the demand for luxury goods for dedication). Although Samian hammered protomes from this period

exist, they tend to be more streamlined in shape, while the Olympian examples display a more robust sense of volume, as well as the small cranial protrusions, which do not always appear on the Samian types. For comparison, there is a nearly identical Olympian Group 3 griffin from the Athenian art market from the 1950's now in private hands. This magnificent griffin and the vessel that it was attached to would undoubtedly have been commissioned by a wealthy and/or high-ranking individual, probably as an offering to the gods or as a diplomatic gift between dignitaries.

Complete with no repairs or restorations; small hole at the tip of the upper beak where the bronze has been crushed a bit. Small pierced holes are visible around the base of the neck: they would have been used to rivet the griffin onto the rim of a large bronze cauldron. The entire work is covered in a perfectly smooth, even, deep emerald green patina.

PROVENANCE

Ex- Mr. M.M. private collection, Las Vegas, Nevada, prior to 2006.

EXHIBITED

TEFAF, New York, May 2017

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For the privately owned parallel, see:

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On bronze griffons in general, see:

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KOPKE G., *What Role for Phoenicians ?*, in Kopcke G. et al., *Greece between East and West: 10th- 8th Centuries B.C.*, New York, 1992, p. 106.

On Group 3 griffons, see:

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