

LARGE FIBULA WITH A CAMEO PORTRAIT OF PLAUTILLA (?)

Roman, Late 2nd - early 3rd century A.D.

garnet and glass

9.2 cm x 8.1 cm

Reference: 19946



It was hammered from a gold sheet and chiseled, while the cameo was carved from a semi-precious stone (probably agate) of dark brown color (bottom) with a beige top layer (portrait). This fibula is noteworthy for its great artistic skills and its size.

The elliptical shaped ornament has a hollow and convex, but smooth bottom to which are attached: a) the closure system of the fibula, composed of two small, riveted gold squares, the lower one with the hinge for the pin and the upper one with a hook that allowed the fibula to be fastened to a garment; b) two small loop-in-loop gold chains that support four identical pendants, in the shape of a leaf decorated with a garnet, and a small bead in translucent blue glass. The bottom extends in a horizontal and openwork edge (*opus interrasile*) consisting of a heart frieze and of a stylized palmettes one, typical of the Roman period jewelry.

The central cameo is surrounded by an elaborate decoration in which several concentric friezes follow one another, alternating each time with a line of small gold beads. From the exterior, there are in the order: a wreath of elongated leaves with a rounded tip, a frieze of half-moons, another one with bent-ended "drops", a braid made of four thin gold wires.

The portrait, very finely carved in the cameo, depicts an apparently young woman with idealized features and an unwrinkled face. She is dressed in a) a sleeveless tunic, which forms an undulating border on the décolleté and is fastened on the shoulder (the round fibula is clearly visible on the shoulder, despite the miniature size of the image); b) a fabric draping her breast and her arm (the undulating border passes slightly above the breast); c) a thicker coat with heavy folds covering her lower bust.

Among the personal features that characterize this head, it is

necessary to bring attention to the round face, the somewhat soft and rounded shapes of the jaw and cheek, the break in the upper profile of the nose, the globular eyes with deeply incised eyelids, the prominent mouth and the strong chin. The ear, perfectly detailed, is entirely uncovered and a small hair curl is carved just below the temple.

The melon hairstyle and the vertical plait-chignon (a wig?), braided behind the neck, allow us to date this portrait between the late 2nd and the early 3rd century A.D. The different locks are regularly and realistically engraved, both on the skull and in the thick posterior part of the hair.

Such large fibulas are very rare but nevertheless attested in iconography, for instance on Palmyrean steles, where many women have their coats fastened and adorned on the shoulder with similar ornaments. The quality and importance of this work clearly suggest that it was not meant to be worn by a simple Roman citizen and that the figure represented on the cameo probably belonged to the high aristocracy of the age, or even to the Imperial family. This gem can therefore be related to the famous gold medallions coined as Imperial gifts (the presence of the laurel wreath on the ornament strengthens this hypothesis) and presented to some senior officers, whose earliest examples date to the reign of Gordian III (238-244) or even the time of Alexander Severus (222-235).

For historical and stylistic reasons, among the young women belonging to the Imperial circle then, the only ones that can be taken into account in the identification of the face are Plautilla and Septimius Severus' two daughters and first wife. The last three figures being quite secondary in Roman history (they are mentioned only in *Historia Augusta*, *Life of Septimius Severus*, VIII, 1; III, 2), the most serious candidate remains Plautilla, Caracalla's wife.

Although having been Augusta during a relatively short period (spring 202-February 205), her effigy appears on many monetary issues that are not completely unambiguous from a typological point of view (differences in the treatment of the hair and face). Her features on these images, however, stick reasonably well with the face of the woman carved on our jewel (face shapes sometimes quite soft, eyes form, nose profile, prominent chin, etc.). Life-size stone portraits, whose identification with Caracalla's wife is not always unanimously accepted among modern critics, show an important degree of variability and cannot confirm or refute this attribution.

Fulvia Plautilla was the daughter of Gaius Fulvius Plautianus, a great landlord from Leptis Magna (modern day Libya), friend of Septimius Severus who made him a Praetorian prefect. In the early 3rd century, to consolidate his succession, the Emperor married his eldest son Caracalla to Plautilla (202); but the relationships inside the couple deteriorated rapidly, without the young woman having succeeded in giving birth to an heir to the Empire. Following a power struggle between G. F. Plautianus and Julia Domna, wife of Septimius Severus and mother of Caracalla, the latter sided with his mother, assassinated Plautianus in 205 and repudiated immediately Plautilla, exiled to the Lipari Islands. She was murdered there in 212 at the behest of her husband, who had become an emperor in 211 after Septimius Severus' death.

CONDITION

Complete and in remarkable state of preservation. Only the pin is lost and minor dents, indicating it has been worn during Ancient times, are visible under the bottom et on the edge of the jewel.

PROVENANCE

Ex- R. Bussey private collection, Switzerland.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

On portraits of Plautilla, see:

JUCKER I., Rätsel um Plautilla in *Antike Kunst* 46, 2003, pp. 72-80.

MEISCHNER J., *Das Frauenporträt der Severen*, Danzig, 1964, pp. 78-88.

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WIGGERS H. B. – WEGNER M., *Caracalla, Geta, Plautilla; Macrinus bis Balbinus*, Berlin, 1971, pp. 115ff.

On cameos during Severus period, see:

MEGOW W.-R., *Kameen von Augustus bis Alexander Severus*, Berlin, 1987, pp. 125-129, pl. 48-51.

On the type of jewelry, see for example:

SADURSKA A. – BOUNNI A., *Les sculptures funéraires de Palmyre* (*Rivista di Archeologia, Supplemento* 13), Roma, 1995, nn. 71, 124, 129, 206, 219.

On the medallion given by Gordian III to his officers, see:

In Pursuit of the Absolute, Art of the Ancient World, The G. Ortiz Collection, Bern, 1996, n. 238.