

ORNAMENT WITH THE MASTER OF THE ANIMALS

Near-Eastern, middle of the 3rd millennium B.C.

Arsenical copper

Height: 15.8 cm Width; 20 cm

Reference: 16927



Complete object, cast in solid copper; probably made from two or three elements which were then assembled (figural scene, pin, head of snake). Surface largely covered with a thick, grainy green patina.

Composed of: a) a long cylindrical stalk, soldered at right angles to the center of the upper ornament and that probably fulfilled a functional purpose, to attach the object to its original support; b) the scone, triangular in shape when seen frontally and flat (only the heads of the oxen, partially hollow, emerge in three dimensions from the background of the scene), displaying a complex image featuring two humped bovids (zebus), whose necks are directed downwards and that stand upright on a flat ground represented by a single horizontal line. The two bovids are back to back and support, seated on their croups, a human figure with buttocks placed on heels: according to a widespread iconography in the contemporary Near Eastern world, this is probably a man with his head seen in profile, his nude torso seen frontally and dressed only in a skirt fastened at the waist by a belt. He has long hair and holds in his hands two snakes with sinuous bodies, which rise vertically and open their mouths. Above the head of the man is a mysterious semicircular object: it might be either a pair of horns (or horned headgear) or the crescent moon, a symbol of the Near Eastern moon god Sin. In both cases, the scene would therefore refer to the religious sphere. A third snake emerges horizontally from the ornament, between the two bovids. In the rear, the object is flat. The areas between the various actors of the scene are partially decorated in openwork and show metal off-cuts left in a somewhat hasty way along the edges.

The superficial wear of the surface does not enable us to appreciate the incised or modeled details that embellished the figures, but the style of the composition clearly resembles the one known as Intercultural style, that recent archaeological discoveries in the region of Kerman (central Iran) have largely enriched, or even reassessed. In the

iconography of this style, the same figure as in our example appears several times, especially on chlorite vessels (cylindrical vase in the British Museum, trunconical vases in the Louvre and in a Japanese collection, for example), but also in small sculpture (bronze statuette in the Louvre): the man, who is probably a mythological being but whose exact nature cannot be specified (god, hero, etc.), would be a sort of master of the animals dominating both domesticated species, represented by the bovids (whose economic importance was fundamental within the framework of Near Eastern ancient cultures), and wild animals, embodied by the snakes.

Despite the presence of the central stem, however, the structural massiveness, the sense of strength and the fact that the scene is arranged perpendicularly to the stem do not allow us to relate this piece to the copper pins of the Bronze Age, some examples of which reach considerable dimensions (see the pin with a figural scene, housed in the Louvre). Our example, which does not seem to have any close parallel, rather suggests a use as a decorative element, offered perhaps as an ex-voto to a shrine, to be placed on a large support such as a piece of woodwork, a door, a wall or more generically an element of architecture which remains undetermined.

PROVENANCE

Acquired on the French art market (Boisgirard & Associés, Paris, October 19, 2003, Lot 52)

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The long pin in the Louvre:

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