

PERSIAN CEREMONIAL BRONZE AXEHEAD

Persia, end of the 2nd millennium B.C.

Bronze

L: 15.4 cm

Reference: 19388



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Typologically, this piece is not easy to define; only the presence of the cylindrical eye enables us to reasonably identify this elegant and elaborate shape as an axehead. The lack of any effective blade does not allow us to consider it as a tool or as a weapon and suggests that it was a symbol of power or, more probably, an ex-voto offered to a deity.

Like most Near Eastern axeheads, this specimen is composed of three elements: a) the blade component is entirely replaced here by a cast group depicting a fight between three animals – two huge dogs and a lion – with a central supporting tenon (regular scales incised at the base indicate a tree trunk); the two dogs are symmetrical and stand upright on their hind legs, while their right forelegs are placed on the tenon and their left forelegs support the lion, arranged perpendicular to them, which is thus suspended in the air in a somewhat unnatural way; the smaller dog bites the lion on the hindquarters, while the larger one is attacked by the big cat which sinks its fangs behind its adversary's neck; stylistically, it is noteworthy that this scene, despite the cruelty it displays, is perfectly balanced and rendered in a delicate and elegant manner (slender and well-proportioned figures, many anatomical details conveyed by precise incisions and well-rounded shapes); b) the cylindrical eye, with its thin wall, is adorned with a thick ribbon on its lower edge and terminates in two volutes at the opposite end; c) the poll is atrophied and replaced by a second cast group, made up of the same animals as a), but represented here in a more realistic position with their legs resting on the outer surface of the eye; they are therefore arranged vertically in relation to the observer and to the other fight scene; as before, the two dogs attack the lion from the front and from the rear, while the wild animal, at the center, bites the neck of one of the dogs. This axehead – which can be included in group B (haches à collet) as classified by J. Deshayes – has no precise parallel, making its classification difficult and provisional. It can be compared

typologically to a group of axeheads probably produced in Iran, in which the blade is partially covered with figures of animals (or mythical creatures) in relief or entirely replaced by groups modeled in the round; best parallels are two axes (Calmeyer, group 65), one showing two lions seated on their hind legs attacking a zebu and the other featuring a composition with a lion's head spitting other lions and axes. Another axehead in the N.M. Heeramanek Collection presents a decoration with animals, isolated or in a group, in the round or in relief, occupying almost the entire surface of the object. All these specimens are usually dated to the late 2nd millennium B.C., to which our example can reasonably be attributed.

CONDITION

Complete and almost intact object, except for the partially worn surface, especially on the figural groups. Made by the lost wax process from various elements which would have been cast separately and then soldered to the eye. Dark brown metal with traces of green patina. Many irregular lines visible on the surface of the metal (damage?); traces of possible breaks repaired on the lions' legs.

PROVENANCE

Gallery H. Vollmoeller, Zurich, 1969.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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DESHAYES J., *Les outils de bronze, de l'Indus au Danube (IVe-Ile millénaire)*, Paris, 1960, type B.

MOOREY P.R.S. et al., Ancient Bronzes, Ceramics and Seals: The N.M. Heerameck Collection of Ancient Near Eastern, Central Asiatic and European Art, Los Angeles, 1981, pp. 20-23, no. 16.