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Statuette of Odysseus under a Ram

525-500 BC

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Object Details

Catalogue Number	54
Inventory Number	79.AD.37 
Typology	Statuette
Location	Sicily
Dimensions	H: 14.2 cm; W: 16.7 cm

Fabric

Pinkish in color (Munsell 2.5 yr 7/6), fairly well purified, and friable with small reflective inclusions, covered with a thick layer of paste composed of milk of lime. Sporadic traces of pink pigment on the animal's muzzle. The body is hollow, except for the hooves. Beneath the ram's belly is a vent fissure.

Condition

The left back leg has been reassembled from two fragments and the right front leg from one fragment. The white milk-of-lime paste has almost completely detached and persists only on the head, on the proper left side, and on the front hooves. All four legs have breaks.

Provenance

– by 1971, Alex G. Malloy (New York, New York); 1977–1979, Lee Rizzuto (Lakewood, New Jersey), donated to the J. Paul Getty Museum, 1979.

Bibliography

Alex G. Malloy. *Ancient Art and Antiquities II*, New York. Catalogue, 1971, pp. 13, 16, no. 84;
LYONS, BENNETT, AND MARCONI 2013, pp. 190–91, fig. 131.

Description

The group depicts Odysseus, or one of his companions, fleeing from the grotto of the Cyclops Polyphemos by hiding beneath the belly of a ram. The animal is rendered in a somewhat stylized manner conceived to be covered by the white paste, with a cylindrical body and short stick legs, while the head reveals more defined modeling, especially in the rendering of the twisted horns and the muzzle.¹ Of the male figure, only part of the head is shown, projecting from between the animal's front legs, with no indication of a body, nor of the arms that in many other depictions of this subject appear gripping the animal's back. The man's face is oval, with globular eyes; the hair is arranged in an arch over the forehead, with small globular ringlets.² The animal's fleece is rendered with a milk-of-lime paste applied to the surface of the clay, then smoothed with a tool. The piece is hollow and low-fired.

This Homeric episode, recounted in the ninth book of the *Odyssey*, is one of the most recurrent themes in Greek figurative culture. Beginning in the Orientalizing period and especially in the Archaic period, the scene was frequently rendered not only within the iconographic repertory of Attic vases but also in fictile reliefs, appliqués, and bronze tripods.³

According to literary tradition, Sicily was the homeland of the Cyclopes, but the topography of the places described in the Homeric text are still very much subject to debate.⁴ Nevertheless, the hero and his wanderings were a very common and lively subject within the culture of the colonies of Magna Graecia and Sicily.⁵

It is possible that a cult of the Greek hero may have arisen as early as the Archaic period in the eastern area of Sicily, as seems to be suggested by the discovery of an *arula* from Megara Hyblaea, dating from the third quarter of the sixth century BC, with a scene of Odysseus escaping from the cave of Polyphemos.⁶

The Getty statuette, which is reported to have come from Sicily, finds its closest comparison with a terracotta now in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, which is presumed to come originally from Barrafranca (Enna) and is likewise datable to the end of the sixth century BC.⁷ Though objective evidence is lacking, the close analogies between the two pieces would support the hypothesis that they shared a common archaeological context.

These two statuettes are closely comparable with a number of works in bronze: an appliqué with the hero beneath the ram, dating from the second half of the sixth century and originally from Delphi; and the handle fixtures—of Laconian inspiration—with rams belonging to bronze hydriai dating from the middle of the sixth century BC, but also found in the Corinthian milieu after 550 BC.⁸

Appendix

The piece has been subjected to UV light testing, which did not reveal any irregularities.

Notes

1. In the Archaic period, depictions of rams are often associated with Odysseus; see A. J. Heisserer, “An Archaic Greek Bronze Ram-Figurine,” *ArchCl* 41 (1989), pp. 383–90.
2. The face of Odysseus, especially in the rendering of the eyes and hair, shows distinctive Archaic characteristics.
3. A complete bibliography on the theme as it appears in various artistic genres can be found in B. Andreae, “L’immagine di Ulisse nell’arte antica,” in B. Andreae and C. Parisi Presicce, eds., *Ulisse: Il mito e la memoria*, exh. cat. (Rome, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 1996), pp. 49–51, entries 2.17–2.28, pp. 130–32; for a more recent catalogue, see B. Andreae, *Odysseus: Mythos und Erinnerung*, exh. cat. (Munich, Haus der Kunst, 2000), pp. 122–35. See also D. Buitron-Oliver, ed., *The Odyssey and Ancient Art: An Epic in Word and Image*, exh. cat. (New York, Edith C. Blum Art Institute, 1992), pp. 33–37, 66–73, 210–11.
4. On the problems with the “geography” of the *Odyssey*, see A. Mele, “Il processo di storicizzazione dei miti,” in *Mito e storia in Magna Grecia*, *Atti Taranto* 36, 1996 (Taranto, 1997), pp. 151–66, and in the same volume, L. Braccisi, “Letteratura dei *nostoi* e colonizzazione greca,” pp. 81–95. For the heroic cult of Odysseus in Greece and Southern Italy, see I. Malkin, “Heroes and the Foundation of Greek Cities,” in P. Azara, R. Mar, and E. Subías, eds., *Mites de fundació de ciutats al món antic (Mesopotàmia, Grècia i Roma)*: Actes del colloqui, Museu d’Arqueologia de Catalunya Monografies 2 (Barcelona, 2001), pp. 123–30.
5. For the iconography of Odysseus in the West, see MASSERIA AND TORELLI 1999, esp. pp. 241–43; see also E. D. Philipps, “Odysseus in Italy,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 73 (1953), pp. 53–67.
6. See G. Voza and P. Pelagatti, *Archeologia nella Sicilia sud-orientale*, exh. cat. (Naples, Centre J. Bérard, 1973), pl. 52, no. 480; and MEIJDEN 1993, pp. 113–14, 313–14.
7. FISCHER-HANSEN 1992, no. 39, p. 74. The area occupied by the modern town of Barrafranca was densely populated in ancient times, as attested by numerous materials from necropoleis, datable from the Archaic period to the Byzantine period; in this connection, see G. Bejor, s.v. “Barrafranca,” in G. Nenci and G. Vallet, eds., *Bibliografia topografica della colonizzazione greca in Italia e nelle isole tirreniche*, vol. 4 (Pisa and Rome, 1985), pp. 1–4. For Magna Graecia, see also the ram-shaped terracotta from a Tarentine funerary deposit dating from the first quarter of the fifth century BC, in A. D’Amicis, *Vecchi scavi, nuovi restauri*, exh. cat. (Taranto, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, 1991), from Tomb 12 of the Civic Hospital of SS. Annunziata.
8. See, in this context, C. Stibbe, *The Sons of Hephaistos: Aspects of the Archaic Greek Bronze Industry* (Rome, 2000), fig. 96, and a handle from a hydria from Gela with an unfinished ram’s body in C. Rolley, *Les vases du bronze de l’archaïsme récent en Grand-Grèce*, Bibliothèque de l’Institut français de Naples, 2nd ser., 5 (Naples, 1982), p. 43, fig. 152.