


59

Clipeus with the Head of Medusa

THIRD-SECOND CENTURIES BC

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Object Details

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| Catalogue Number | 59 |
| Inventory Number | 71.AD.255  |
| Typology | Clipeus |
| Location | Sicily |
| Dimensions | D: 1.9 cm; Diam: 18.6 cm |

Fabric

Beige in color (Munsell 10 yr 8/3 and 7.5 yr 8/4), compact and purified, extensive traces of polychromy over a layer of calcite (?) slip: black (strip around the hem), pink (lips and hair), light blue and pink (scales), and red (eyes). Clipeus and head from two molds.

Condition

Reassembled from numerous fragments, faded polychromy.

Provenance

– 1967 Unknown [sold, Kunstwerke der Antike: Terrakotten, Bronzen, Keramik, Skulpturen, Auktion 34, Munzen und Medaillen AG, Basel, May 6, 1967, lot. 75]; 1971, Royal Athena Galleries (New York, New York), sold to the J. Paul Getty Museum, 1971.

Bibliography

Kunstwerke der Antike, Terrekotten, Bronzen, Keramik, Skulpturen, Münzen und Medaillen AG (Basel), sale cat., May 6, 1967, pp. 35–36, lot 75; *SELECTED WORKS* 1971, no. 69; BELL 1981, p.

233, n. 930; J. Grossman, “Images of Alexander the Great in the Getty Museum,” *Studia Varia from the J. Paul Getty Museum* 2, Occasional Papers on Antiquities, 10 (2001), pp. 51–78, esp. p. 62, no. 7, fig. 7; LYONS, BENNETT, AND MARCONI 2013, pp. 200–201, fig. 143.

Description

The *clipeus* (plaque) presents a beaded edge with a head of Medusa (gorgoneion), characterized by pathetic traits, applied in high relief just above the center. The Medusa is facing very slightly to the right, with wreath wings on her head. Her undulating snaky hair, parted in the center, flows back on either side of the face; the face is full, and the orbital area is rather marked; the mouth is small and fleshy. On her neck, she wears a tubular necklace with a pendant at the center; beneath it is a pair of intertwined snakes, also encircling her neck. Three concentric rows of scales of increasing size, with a central rib, radiate out from the head. There are two suspension holes on the head.

This Medusa-head *clipeus* can be assigned to a well-known production from Centuripe, widespread, in the Hellenistic period, in Magna Graecia and in a number of centers in southeastern Sicily, such as Morgantina. In Centuripe and Morgantina, *clipei* with gorgoneia were found primarily in contexts dating from the third to the first centuries BC.¹

In Centuripe, especially, the iconographic motif adheres to constant schemes and can also be found in the vases of the time, often decorated with small Gorgon heads applied in relief and characterized also by a similar use and distribution of polychromy. The iconographic scheme was then varied by differences in the treatment of such elements as the hairstyle, the wings, or the snakes.² Despite the fact that the role of the Gorgon in the Hellenistic period was largely decorative, its apotropaic significance must have persisted, given that, especially in Centuripe, it remained one of the most popular iconographic motifs for the decoration of vases and objects intended for funerary deposits. These terracotta *clipei*, which served as *oscilla* (small offerings meant to swing in the wind), seem to have been derived from metal prototypes; in Centuripe, there are reports of gilt-silver *clipei* showing a bust of a maenad in three-quarter view.³

Notes

1. See the examples from Centuripe in LIBERTINI 1926, pp. 117–18, pl. XXXVII, nos. 3–4; LIBERTINI 1947, pp. 273–75, figs. 7, 14 a–c; U. Spigo text for entry no. 362, in *LA SICILIA GRECA* * 1989, no. 362, datable to the middle of the third century BC and originally from the necropolis of Centuripe; for Morgantina, see BELL 1981, p. 233, nos. 928–30, pl. 138, dating from the third century BC and assignable to the production of the Catania Group; and SCHÜRMANN 1989, nos. 975–76, fig. 161 (linked to Centuripe and datable to the third quarter of the third century BC). For two **clipei* with gorgoneia from the Hellenistic necropolis of Cefalù, datable to the second century BC, see C. Greco, “Le terrecotte figurate,” in A. Tullio, *Cefalù: La necropoli ellenistica*, vol. 1 (Palermo, 2008),

pp. 121–26, TC 61–62, pl. XXVII, nos. 3–4. The dispersal of the material from Centuripe onto the antiquities market is evidenced by the numerous pieces that have appeared in auction catalogues; see, for instance: *Antiquities*, W. and F. C. Bonham and Sons (Knightsbridge), sale cat., November 26, 1997, lot 352; and April 7, 1998, lot 112. On Centuripe, see E. C. Portale, “Un ‘fenomeno strano ed inatteso’: riflessioni sulla ceramica di Centuripe,” in *Pittura ellenistica in Italia ed in Sicilia: Linguaggi e tradizioni. Atti del Convegno di Studi: Messina, 24–25 settembre 2009*, ed. G. F. La Torre (Rome, 2011), pp. 157–82.

2. For the Gorgon in the Hellenistic period, see I. Krauskopf, s.v. “Gorgo, Gorgones,” *LIMC* 4 (1988), pp. 285–330, esp. 328–29, nos. 129–30 (examples of Gorgons on an *askos* from Canosa and on a *lekanis* from Centuripe); see also the Gorgon on the *lekanis* in E. Joly, “La ceramica: Botteghe e maestri della Sicilia ellenistica,” in *SIKANIÉ* 1985, pp. 348–58, esp. pp. 352–53, fig. 435.
3. LIBERTINI 1947, from Grave 22, pp. 272–75, fig. 7.