




49

Altar with Animals

350-300 BC

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Object Details

Catalogue Number	49
Inventory Number	71.AD.148 
Typology	Altar
Location	South Italy
Dimensions	H: 8.7 cm; W: 10 cm; D: 10.7 cm; inscription panel: 3.4 x 1.7 cm

Fabric

Reddish in color (Munsell 2.5 yr 7/8–7.5 yr 8/6), hard, and porous with numerous reflective and calcareous inclusions of considerable size.

Condition

Gaps at the corners and in the cornices.

Provenance

– 1968, Fallani (Rome, Italy); 1971, Royal Athena Galleries (New York, New York), sold to the J. Paul Getty Museum, 1971.

Bibliography

SELECTED WORKS 1971, no. 60; KINGSLEY 1976, p. 13, fig. 36.

Description

The *arula*, parallelepiped in shape, is squared off with rectangular cornices at the top and the base, above which a thin fillet serves as a ground line for the figures. The underside was hollowed out in order to reduce the weight and to facilitate firing. The four faces are decorated with molded figures of animals in low relief, which were finished with a potter's rib.¹ The letters ΔΙΟ (Dionysos) are inscribed on the top surface.²

On side A, a goat is depicted in a stationary stance facing left, with front and back legs joined and firmly planted on the ground. The animal's head is lowered, with the muzzle pressed against its chest as if preparing to charge the panther on the adjacent side. The goat has delicate horns that curve back along the neck, a short upturned tail, a prominent phallus, and fleece rendered in small, wavy locks.

On side B, a panther moves toward the right, with its left paw raised. The body is sinuous and arched, with a well-defined attachment of the back left leg; the long tail twists and curves upward in a sigmoid shape.

On side C, a lioness faces left with her right front paw raised. Her body is long, narrowing at the middle, and the fur is rendered in a stylized manner with short, flame-shaped locks; the tail and the attachment of the back leg are similar to the preceding figure.

On side D, a griffin advances toward the right, confronting the lioness on the adjacent side with its left front paw lifted and wings spread; they are attached at the shoulder and defined by incised, elongated feathers; the left (back) wing appears in profile beneath the creature's head. The anatomical parts are stylized, especially the long, flexing body and the S-curved tail, which belong to the Archaic tradition.³ This type of *arula*—small in size, made from a block of clay, and decorated with animals and mythological creatures—is widespread in Magna Graecia, especially in Metaponto,⁴ Caulonia,⁵ and Locri,⁶ and is generally dated to the second half of the fourth century BC. There are significant ties between the four animals and the deity to whom the *arula* was to be dedicated: the griffin, the panther, the lioness, and the goat, in fact, frequently accompany Dionysos and his entourage. The association with the griffin and the panther seems to be documented as far back as the end of the fifth century, as documented by Apulian vases. The griffin seems to be more closely affiliated with a type of chthonic Dionysos that is probably of Thracian-Phrygian origin.⁷

In Sicily, too, as early as in the Archaic period, *arulae* with depictions of animals have been found, evidence of the early assimilation by the colonial world of iconographic motifs from the Greek and Eastern regions, motifs that, through the medium of vases as well, persist over

time without any particular stylistic development. Likewise, a number of Archaic formal conventions, such as the S-shaped tails, found also in small Laconian or Corinthian bronzes diffused in the West, would continue to appear for a long time.⁸ The most pertinent comparison is with a number of *arulae* from Metaponto that present the same typology and subjects, though they are arranged in a different order; the use of individual molds allowed a certain decorative variety within a substantially repetitive production.⁹

There is some debate over the origin of this type: Pierre Willeumier believed it could be assigned to Tarentine production due to its similarity to subjects found in appliqués or in imitations of gilded terracotta costume jewelry, as well as in Apulian vases. Other scholars believe the type could be more properly assigned to the area of Metaponto, especially due to the quantity of pieces found in that area.¹⁰

Notes

1. For this type of *arula*, see MEIJDEN 1993, TI 27–34 (from Metaponto) and TI 35 (from Taranto), pls. 24–25, pp. 28–38, 243–44, datable to the second half of the fourth century BC.
2. See the inscription dedicated to Dionysos in abbreviation and in the Achaean alphabet inscribed on an Attic oinochoe dating from the end of the sixth century BC: F. G. Lo Porto, “Testimonianze archeologiche di culti metapontini,” *Xenia* 16 (1988), pp. 5–28, fig. 17. For the abbreviated name of Dionysos in Taras, see WILLEUMIER 1939, pp. 394–95; *TARANTO* 1995, pp. 181–82.
3. For the depiction of the griffin, see ORLANDINI 1959, pls 29, nos. 3–30; D. Ricciotti, *Terrecotte votive*, 1. *Arule*, Studi materiali dei Musei e monumenti comunale di Roma, Antiquarium Comunale di Roma (Rome, 1978), p. 62, pl. XXXIII; C. Delplace, *Le griffon de l’archaïsme à l’époque impériale: Étude iconographique et essai d’interprétation symbolique* (Brussels, 1980), pp. 151–60.
4. For Metaponto, see LETTA 1971, pl. XXIX, nos. 1–4 (late fourth–third century BC); LO PORTO 1966, p. 154, fig. 15 (*arula* in reddish clay with the figure of a griffin and a lion, from Contrada Sansone).
5. For Caulonia, see P. Orsi, “Caulonia,” *MonAnt* 23 (1914), fig. 58 (from a domestic context); H. Tréziny, *Kaulonia: Sondage sur la fortification nord, 1982–1985* (Naples, 1989), p. 79, no. 353, figs. 51–54. A Caulonian origin has also been proposed for the four miniature *arulae* found in Naxos, Sicily: see LENTINI 1993, pp. 42–43.
6. For Locri: BARRA BAGNASCO 1989, pp. 55–60, 118–19, pl. XXVI, no. 142.
7. For the association of Dionysos with the panther and the goat, see L. Bodson, *Hiera zôia: Contribution à l’étude de la place de l’animal dans la religion grecque ancienne* (Brussels, 1978), pp. 127–28; J. R. Green, *Gnathia Pottery in the Akademisches Kunstmuseum Bonn* (Mainz am Rhein, 1976), pl. 6, no. 5 (*pelike* with a running panther, 340–330 BC). For the links between Dionysos and the griffin, see WOYSCH-MÉAUTIS 1982, pp. 84–87, and in particular at Metaponto, see TEMPESTA 2005.
8. From Gela, there is an *arula* with a front panel depicting a griffin in deep relief, datable as early as the second half of the sixth century BC; see ORLANDINI 1959, pp. 99–100, figs. 29, 30; see also the *arula* from Vassallaggi (Gela), fig. 30, no. 1a. A similar *arula* comes from Agrigento and is generally dated to the fourth century BC; see SCHÜRMANN 1989, no. 373, fig. 65.
9. Consider the comparison suggested in n. 4; there is a similar *arula* also in S. Lagona, *La collezione Santapaola nel Museo archeologico di Lentini* (Catania, 1973), pp. 107–8, no. 306, pl. XL.

10. The hypothesis that this type originated in Metaponto was also supported in LO PORTO 1966; for the presence of the cult of Dionysos in Metaponto, see TEMPESTA 2005, with further bibliography.