

= Cup of the Ptolemies =

The Cup of the Ptolemies (French : Coupe des Ptolémées) is an onyx cameo two @-@ handled cup , or kantharos . The cup , decorated with Dionysiac vignettes and emblems , was carved at some point in Classical Antiquity , probably in Alexandria . Eventually , it found its way into the treasury of the French kingdom , before it was donated to the abbey of St. Denis . During the Middle Ages , it was used as a Christian chalice , and lavish mounts were added , with Latin inscriptions . In 1804 , the cup was stolen , and the mounts were lost , although the cup itself was recovered . It is now in the Cabinet des Médailles at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France , Paris .

= = Description = =

The two @-@ handled cameo cup , one of the acknowledged masterpieces among hardstone carvings of classical antiquity , was carved out of onyx and measures 8 @.@ 4 cm high with a diameter of 12 @.@ 5 cm . The cup is covered in Dionysiac vignettes and emblems , depicting masks , vases , holy animals , and garland : symbols of the cult itself .

On the upper @-@ left side of what is today considered the back of the vessel , the mask of young Pan can be seen in the tree . Below , a goat is reaching for ripened grapes . Behind the goat lies fruit and a table , most likely an anclabris with five ceremonial vessels on top . On the left side of the table stands a small female figure , whose lit torches represent the festivities and the orgies associated with the cult 's rites . Frédéric de Clarac argued that the statues could very well symbolize either Telete or Ceres , two deities often associated with Dionysus . Above the table is a tapestry and two bacchante masks . To the right , in an apple tree , another mask of Pan can be seen . Two more bacchante masks are present on the bottom , in front of the table .

The reverse side is extremely similar to the other , showing six masks surrounding a anclabris , although there are a few major differences . The anclabris is depicted as if it were made out of marble , and two sphinxes ? beings that serve as allegories for the secrets and mysteries of the Dionysian cult ? are supporting the table . On the anclabris stands a small statue of Hermes , next to which hangs a mask with pipes . Above this mask may very well be the raven of Apollo . On the left side of the table , a goat is seen resting on the ground , surrounded by the symbols of the cult . Finally , a wicker basket can be found to the right of the table , out of which a snake emerges ; this basket motif is often found in Dionysian artwork , and seemingly was an object of great importance to the religion .

It seems that the vessel 's pagan origins were overlooked when it was converted into a Christian chalice during the Middle Ages . Classicist Erika Zwierlein @-@ Diehl noted that many descriptions of the cup omitted the Dionysiac nature of the carvings and images , merely noting the general presence of trees , heads , and animals . This (possibly purposeful) loss of iconographic understanding , also referred to as " un @-@ naming " , seems to have been a way for pagan artifacts to be reused for Christian purposes ; the Cup of the Ptolemies is therefore an example of interpretatio christiana , or the adaptation of non @-@ Christian elements of culture or historical facts to the worldview of Christianity .

= = History = =

The cup was probably made in Alexandria , Egypt . It was once thought to date back to the Hellenistic period , c . 250 BC , but is now regarded as dating to the 1st century AD . Its supposed connection with the Ptolemies dates back to a description in 1644 by historian Jean Tristan de Saint @-@ Amant ; he argued that the vase was made for the funeral processions of Ptolemy II Philadelphus , who ruled the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt from 285 until 246 BC . Scholar E. Babelon argued that the cup had been made in Egypt during the general time of the Ptolemies , a much looser range stretching from 305 to 30 BC . However , there is no particular evidence for this , and other scholars , such as John Henry Middleton or Martin Conway , suggest that the cup was carved later , during the first or second centuries AD by Romans . Dating the cup has been

problematic largely because similar pieces are rare , making comparison difficult .

The exact history of the cup is largely unknown , although Conway suggests that the cup probably belonged to the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne before being passed down through the French kings , one of whom eventually donated it to the abbey of Saint Denis . The cup was occasionally used as a chalice for communion wine , and figured in the coronation of the French monarch , at which , according to S. G. Millet as quoted by Conway , the queens took " ablution from this chalice , after holy communion " . In 1634 , the cup was estimated to be worth around 25 @, @ 000 livres , with the gem @-@ encrusted gold mountings valued at 1 @, @ 200 livres . Until September 1791 it formed part of the treasury of the Basilica of Saint @-@ Denis . It was stolen in 1804 , although it was later recovered ? without its mounts ? when the thieves were caught in Holland . The cup is now in the Cabinet des Médailles at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris .

= = Chalice mount = =

Sometime during the Carolingian period , a base " in the shape of a truncated cone " was constructed to make the vessel appear more like a traditional chalice , and the cup 's knob was " partially covered with cloisonné goldsmith work " . Later , in the 12th century , Abbot Suger of Saint Denis (who served from AD 1122 ? 1151) probably embellished the chalice , adding the metalwork that widens the bottom of the chalice . These mounts were made out of gold and were gem @-@ studded . After the cup was recovered in the 19th century , it was missing its mounts , which were probably melted down for their precious materials . Today , the mounts are only known through an engraving by Michel Félibien that was made in 1706 .

Suger also added a two @-@ line Latin inscription on the chalice mount , known only from the engraving made by Félibien , which reads : hoc vas Xpe tibi [devota] mente dicavit tertius in Francos [sublimis] regmine Karlus . In English , this legend means : " The [exalted] Charles III , on the French throne , consecrated this vessel for you , Christ , with a [faithful] mind . " Most scholars agree that this inscription links it to Charles the Bald , who ruled Western Francia from AD 840 ? 877 . Others think it refers to either the Charlemagne who ruled Francia from AD 768 ? 814 , or Charles the Simple who also ruled Western Francia from AD 919 ? 23 , although these suggestions seem unlikely .