

THE MUSEUMS CENTRE OF ASCOLI SATRIANO

The Ausculum marbles



The Ausculum marbles are a unique collection of tableware objects the significance of which has not been completely explained; the story of its discovery and recovery has only partially revealed its secret. The precious, rare marble used for this type of artifacts, pario and Afrodisia, is enhanced by the wellpreserved painted decoration. These objects were included in the tomb of a highranking personag to bear witness to the wealth and intellectual development he enjoyed during his life, and as a status symbol which accompanied him into the afterlife. Of many funeral furnishings with table settings, this set is outstanding for its monumental vases which were deliberately created not as containers; they therefore had a purely symbolic function. Investigations carried out by the Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale (2006) led to the discovery of a link between the sculpted base for a table representing two gryphons mauling a fawn, the painted podanipter basin in the Getty Museum of Los Angeles, and another 19 marble artifacts seized by the Guardia di Finanza in 1978. The entire complex was brought to light in the territory of the ancient Ausculum (now called Ascoli Satriano, in the province of Foggia), a Daunian centre known for the battle between Pirro and the Romans in 279 BC.

THE OBJECTS' USE

Given the lack of data on the discovery, nothing can be stated with certainty about the original site of this exceptional collection. The most likely theory is that it constituted the furnishings of a chamber tomb datable to the second half of the IV century B C. In this context the podanipter, with its delicate painted decoration, suggests very little practical use; it may have been used solely as a container for lake water during funeral ceremonies. The cavity inserted in the top part of the crater seems to indicate that it may have been used as a cinerarium. This hypothesis is supported by the presence of the golden crown attached to the basin for the purpose of portraying the deceased as a hero. The fact that it comes from a monumental burial area would also explain the presence of the two consoles, which were part of a funeral bed; there are similar ornamental elements on Grecian bases for klinai and seats.

THE MARBLE AND ITS COLOURS

Petrographic and geochemical studies have identified the type of marble used to make the objects. Studies have shown that most of the artifacts are of marble taken from the Stephani quarries on the island of Paros, while the consoles are from the Lefkes quarries on the island of Paros and the base with gryphons appears to be of Afrodisia marble. The marble is decorated with many shades of color: red, purplish-red, sky-blue, pink, white, beige, yellow, green, and brown. The decoration on the podanipter provides information about the process used in painting: the figures were first sketched in different widths and shades for the outlines, which are evident on the bodies of the animals and the face and dress of the Nereid in the best state of preservation. Specialistic research identified the pigments employed to paint the Ausculum relics.

Except for jarosite and natrojarosite (light yellow), all the colors in use in the Mediterranean area to paint with are present: cuprorivaite (Egyptian blue or Pompei blue) for blues, cinnabar and haematite for reds, cerussite and kaolin for white, malachite for green, while golden yellow was made with goethite. Violet came from a lacquer made with madder, a color of vegetable origin which was probably extracted from the roots of *Rubia tinctorum*, absorbed on calcite. Most of the colors used are pure and the shades depend on how finely they were ground. It is mainly the podanipter that was painted over (black over blue, white over red) to define borders or create chiaroscuro effects. The use of cinnabar, cerussite and malachite show that this is a high-quality decoration. The binder used for painting is the same for most of the Ascoli Satriano marble: animal glue and casein were used to paint the chalice crater, the base, and the consoles. A single layer of paint was applied to all the artefacts, directly on the surface of marble that had been sanded down and polished.

SHAPES

The objects which were seized and deposited in the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma laboratories to be studied and restored, were reassembled into 8 vase shapes that had been created by overlaying and joining separate layers created on a lathe and then painting them. With the exception of the crater the vases are not hollow, and are reproductions of tableware vessels that were used to pour liquid (oinochoai and epichyseis), of which currently none exist made of marble; they resemble ceramic vases that were widely produced in southern Italy during the Hellenistic period. On the other hand the water pitcher and the crater (for wine) are the same as shapes that have been found made from marble (loutrophoros), which are reminiscent of Attic funeral urns from the V-IV century BC.

THE PODANIPTER BASIN AND THE NEREIDS



The crater with a support was also made by hand without using a lathe. It is reminiscent of a type of bronze basin common to the more sumptuous burial grounds in southern Italy which was used both for banquets and ceremonial sacrifices. The inside of the basin is painted with the scene of the Nereids carrying Achilles' weapons, forged by Hephaestus at the request of Hera, the hero's mother. Of the three figures astride sea monsters, separated by three dolphins following smaller fish, only the figure with a shield is distinguishable; of the other two, one wore a helmet and one carried a sword. Female figures carrying weapons are widely portrayed in ceramic decoration, especially those from Apulia, as of the early IV century, and foreshadow an important period in the ideology of the Italic élite: a woman, perhaps a wife, arming a warrior. The decoration on the podanipter shows a clear connection with the paintings, probably from Taranto, on the Amazons' sarcophagus (c. IV BC), in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze.

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BASE FOR A TABLE WITH GRYPHONS



The table base in Afrodisia marble portrays two gryphons in the act of mauling a fawn. Their great wings conceal the supporting elements of the table, which is no longer in existence. The design reintroduces on a grand scale an iconographic model traceable to the oriental figurative tradition that employed many different types of materials, particularly to make objects used in furnishings. The lively colour scheme favors the use of yellow on animals. The traces of green, visible on the base, evoke a natural environment, while soft pink hues trace the outlines of the fawn's nostrils and the base of the feathers where they are attached to the gryphons' bodies.

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THE CRATER AND THE GOLD CROWN



The crater was made by hand without the use of a lathe. The basin was decorated with a golden crown with ivy leaves and berries attached separately of which traces remain on the marble, having reappeared during painstaking restorations to reconstruct it virtually. The crater's base and support show evident traces of a painted geometric pattern of decoration.