



A large Roman agate intaglio. Sphinx on a bell-krater.

Dimensions. 13 × 17 × 3,5 mm

Roman art, 1st-2nd century A.D.

Moutning on request

A large Roman agate intaglio of oval form, engraved with a sphinx perched on a bell-krater. The unusually generous size of the stone gave the engraver room for a two-register composition, treated with remarkable attention to detail.

The winged sphinx is set upon the lip of the vase, wing displayed and tail raised in a flourish. Below, the bell-krater is rendered with precision: on the neck, a register shows Eros driving a biga drawn by two cockerels — a miniature within the miniature.

Iconography

The sphinx — lion's body, bird's wings, human head — is the enigmatic guardian of the ancient world: perched on a vase, it watches over its contents as it watched over tombs and sanctuaries. The device unites two registers dear to Roman glyptic, the fabulous bestiary and ceremonial vessels. It is worth recalling that Augustus himself first sealed his letters with a sphinx: in Rome the image carried a very particular authority. The krater, vessel of wine and the banquet, lends the composition a Dionysiac echo, reinforced by the Eros charioteer on the neck: races of Cupids driving teams of animals — cockerels, goats, dolphins — count among the most graceful motifs of the Roman decorative repertoire.

Comparanda

– P. Gołyźniak, Roman Engraved Gems in the National Archaeological Museum in Lisbon, no. 69: glass intaglio with two ravens perched on a huge krater. – London, British Museum, inv. 1887,0307.I.408 (collection online): Wedgwood & Bentley black basalt seal-intaglio (c. 1769–1780), covered vase with a bacchanal and a sphinx couchant on the lid — after a cornelian recorded by Lippert (Lipp. II.529; cf.

Tassie & Raspe, 1791, nos. 13662–13663), evidence of the type's fortune.