Head Of A Man

Yemen

1st Century B.C.

Alabaster

H: 14cm

The clearly carved features with slightly humped slender nose, grooved eyebrows, the eyes with deep pupils, probably originally inlaid, the moustache and low beard indicated by rows of shallowly drilled holes, with pierced ears, the crown of the head only roughly worked but with the hair to the rear of the head indicated by crude gauging and the neck carved in the round. From the manner of the carving of the back of the head and neck of this sculpture it is evident that it comes from a complete figure. The most striking element of this piece is the natural dark surface the alabaster has acquired over centuries, possibly through exposure to weather elements or smoke. The resulting effect is unique to the many other white to yellow alabaster heads found from the region. It can be presumed this head is an example of funerary art from the Southern Arabian kingdoms of the legendary Arabia Felix (or ancient Yemen). Steles and statuettes such as this one were placed in temples in memory of the dead, used a grave markers, or as part of a larger alabaster structure. Southern Arabia was legendary for its spices, in particular the highly prized frankincense, and precious stones, and was thought in antiquity to be a mysterious, distant land flowing with fabulous riches : Horace wrote in his Ode 1.29, “O Iccius, do you long for the wonderful treasures of the Arabs?”. The spice trade enabled this agricultural civilisation to secure wealth and to flourish, with the development of an advanced irrigation system, the construction of colossal buildings and the invention of the South Arabian writing.

Literature:

Classical, Egyptian and Western Asiatic Antiquities, Christie’s, London, 23 March 1971, Lot 115.

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