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Protome In The Shape Of A Winged Ibex

5th - 4th Century B.C.

13.3 x 14.5 cm (5 1/4 x 5 3/4 inches)

Bronze

Also known as the First Persian Empire, the Achaemenid Empire ruled through vast swathes of western Asia between 550-330 B.C. Founded by Cyrus the Great, the empire spanned from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indus River, encompassing all the civilised states of the ancient Near East. The later king Darius I expanded the empire further into Northern Africa, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. This new massive empire established a civic service, official language, road system, postal service and constructed the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, one of the ancient Seven Wonders of the World. Their material culture ranged from monumental structures to fine metal goods and was a hybrid of Median, Asiatic, Greek and Assyrian influences, yet maintained a distinctly Persian identity. This striking Achaemenid Rhyton protome is in the shape of a winged ibex. In antiquity, the body of the Rhyton (now missing) will most probably have been formed from a large hammered bronze cone, tapering into the protome that survives today. Having been designed to stand upright on a flat surface, the animal's front legs are tucked under its torso providing a resting surface. The ibex is complete with elaborate wings which are finished with an intricate stylised design representing feathers. The animal has a majestic horned head which it holds chin down, with the round eyes staring directly ahead. The back of the neck has been decorated with a pattern representing a mane, one that would more commonly have been seen on a horse. The grand horns extend upwards, before curling back down to the ears, symbolising the animal's strength and dominance, whilst simultaneously exhibiting the expert skill of the craftsmen and reflecting the wealth and power of the Rhyton's owner. The object has a beautiful green patina and survives in excellent condition. Little is known of the original use of Rhyta, liquid would have been poured into the large spout or filled through submersion in a larger vessel, and then would be poured out through the small round hole in the ibex's chest as a libation or liquid offering. Many examples of ancient Rhyta have been discovered in wood, ceramic and bronze, often terminating with anthropomorphic horned animals, including bulls, rams, antelopes and stags. Archaeological evidence has suggested that they were used for pouring wine and beer during festivities, oil during religious activities and blood during ceremonial rites perhaps associated with the animal depicted.

Literature:

Apollo, July 1980, p65.

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