

Head of a Woman

Yemen

3rd Century B.C. - 1st Century A.D.

Alabaster

H: 22cm

A female head finely carved from evenly-coloured cream alabaster. The face features a strong chin, high rounded cheekbones, and large elliptical eyes deeply inset for inlays. The remains of the nose indicate that it was long, thin, and roughly triangular in form. A small, round mouth sits just below the nose. Deeply incised eyebrows follow the shape of the eyes, which are framed by unusual grooved canthi on either side, possibly to represent cosmetic eye paint. The supraorbital margins above the eyes are deeply carved, while the carving below the eyes is more subtle, smoothing the sockets into the rounded cheeks. The ears are formed from two arcs and a central sphere, and both lobes are pierced for earrings. The long hair frames the face below the ears, and is carved to create a rougher texture. There is a stock sticker on the back of the neck. A fragment of the right shoulder remains. This suggests that the head was part of a larger sculpture, possibly a full figure (though this seems unlikely due to its relatively large scale) or, more likely, a bust.

Photographs from Wendell Phillips' 1950-51 excavation of Timna, where they found alabaster heads of a similar style to this one (National Museum of Asian Art, Washington, DC)

This head is stylistically aligned with those found at Timna, the capital of the ancient Yemeni kingdom of Qataban, which existed from the 1st millennium BC until the late 1st or 2nd centuries AD. Timna served as an important hub of the Incense Route, the camel caravan that transported incense from Arabia and India to ports on the Mediterranean Sea. Roman author and philosopher Pliny the Elder (23/24-79 AD) described Timna as a busy city with around 65 temples. Excavations in 1950 and 1951 by Wendell Phillips and his team unearthed several sites in the city, including the South Gate, private residences, a structure identified as a temple complex, and the necropolis. The alabaster heads were found in the vicinity of the necropolis, known as Ḥayd ibn ʻAqīl. A further head was discovered in 1962 by a British officer stationed in Aden. The heads are all roughly carved on the reverse and often squared off at the top and back, suggesting that they were designed to be placed within niches in a shrine; several of the sculptures were found together within the antechamber of a crypt.

Literature:

Sotheby's, London, April 29th, 1963, Lot 86.

Gimpel Fils, London, Sculpture from South Arabia, exh. cat., December 1970-January 1971, no. 10.