Head of Khnum

Egypt

1296-656 B.C, New Kingdom to Third Intermediate Period

Steatite

H: 7.9 x W: 6.6 cm

Head of the god Khnum carved out of black steatite. As is typical of depictions of Khnum, the god is shown with a ram's head, with a wig and usekh collar. The two large horns curve inwards and forwards towards the face, in the style of later representations of Khnum (earlier images depict the god with corkscrew horns extending horizontally from his head, to distinguish him from the curved-horned god Amun). The head is pierced vertically through the centre, allowing it to be mounted as a finial.

Khnum was one of the most ancient gods of Egypt, who was worshipped from as early as the Predynastic Period and into the early centuries C.E. Originally a water god, Khnum was the patron god of the First Cataract (area of rapids) of the Nile, and protector of its source. The Egyptians believed that the waters of the Nile proceeded from the god Nun from a hole in the earth at Elephantine, where one of Khnum's most important temples was based. The inundation waters bearing fertile mud were also thought to come from this source; Khnum often features in creation myths using a potter's wheel and primordial mud to create man and his 'ba' (spirit), to create children within their mother's womb, and to assist in birth alongside the frog goddess Heqet. In some myths, Khnum is said to have created the 'First Egg' from which the sun was born. He also had an important cult in Esna, south of Thebes. Khnum was depicted variously as a ram, or a man with a ram's head or horns, and very occasionally with a hawk's head, in reference to his role as the 'ba' of the sun-god Re (who is depicted with a ram's head during his nocturnal journey through the underworld).

Literature:

A. Daninos, Collection d'Antiquités Égyptiennes de Tigrane Pacha d'Abro (Paris, 1911), p. 19, no. 487, plate XLII.