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Omar Pacha Cippus of Horus-Shed

Circa 332-330 B.C., Ptolemaic Period, Egypt

Steatite

H: 12.5

A black steatite magical stele depicting the nude child-god Horus-Shed ('Horus the Saviour') standing with his feet balanced on two crocodiles. In each hand he holds two long serpents and one scorpion by their tails. He also holds a long-horned oryx in his proper right hand and a lion in his left, hanging down on either side of his legs. He sports the sidelock of youth, draped over his right shoulder. Above Horus-Shed's head, the head of the dwarf god Bes is carved in high relief. A series of other deities in human and animal form are incised in the horizontal and vertical registers framing the central gods. Horus-Shed is flanked by standards in the form of lotus and papyrus columns (the symbols of North and South Egypt). Both sides of the stele are inscribed, with twelve registers of text filling the sheer side of the reverse. These inscriptions evoke the cure by Re of the infant Horus from snake and scorpion bites, after he had been hidden in the papyrus swamps by his mother Isis. A lunette featuring a multi-headed solar deity kneeling within a sun disc enclosed by large ka-arms is carved in the centre of the verso side, above the inscriptions. A line of four baboons, with their arms raised in sun worship, stand on either side of the lunette. The sides and bottom of the base of the cippus are also inscribed with other apotropaic lines.

This is one of about 400 known magical stelae featuring Horus-Shed. They are generally inscribed with healing spells referring to the above story, which may have been intended to cure the wielder from a snake bite or scorpion sting. Other spells found on cippi usually allude to broader themes of healing, rejuvenation, and renewal. It is thought that these spells could be activated by pouring water over the cippus to transform it into a curative remedy to be imbibed or applied to the skin. It has also been

theorised that rubbing or kissing the stone could activate the spells, as suggested by particular patterns of ancient wear, as seen on the face of Horus-Shed in this example.

Exhibitions

TEFAF Maastricht, Netherlands, 12-21 March 2010.

On loan to the Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich, November 2013-March 2021.

Frieze Masters, London, October 2024

Literature:

Collection de Feu Omar Pacha Sultan Le Caire (Paris, 1929), no. 274, pl. XLIV.

Maarten van Laarhoven, 'Handelaar die left bij gratie van de pracht', Limburger, 15 March 2010.