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Part of a Naos Sistrum

9.3 x 0 cm (3 ⁵/₈ x 0 inches)

Faience

744-525 BC, 25th-26th Dynasty, Late Period

Part of a naos sistrum in white faience, depicting the head of the goddess Hathor on both of the larger sides. The goddess is represented frontally, the round face framed by small cow's ears on either side. The almond-shaped eyes are recessed to hold glass inlays, as are the tapering eyebrows. On one side, the original blue inlays remain in the brows. The other facial features are carved in very low relief, with the broad nose and straight-lipped mouth surrounded by the full cheeks. The goddess wears a long, braided wig, falling in two locks over the chest that each end in a single curl. A large, highly elaborate wesekh collar extends from below the chin, arranged in tiers alternating between incised patterns of lines, triangles, and florals. Atop the goddess's head is a cornice, carrying the base of a naos, or shrine, lined with uraeus-serpents wearing the solar disc. On the two thin sides of the sistrum, above the shoulders of the goddess, rises a larger uraeus cobra, with flared hood.

Sistra are percussive musical instruments, akin to a rattle. Formed from a thin cylindrical handle holding a U-shaped frame pierced horizontally with crossbars that may hold rings for additional noisemaking.

When shaken, the elements knock together to produce anything from a soft clank to a loud jangling. Sekhem refers to the simpler U-shaped instrument, while the naos sistrum is known onomatopoeically as a sesheshet. Sistra were sacred instruments used in dances and religious ceremonies, and often associated with the goddess Hathor.

Hathor was one of the major goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon, who held a wide range of roles. She was a sky deity, mother/consort of Horus and Ra, and therefore the symbolic mother of the pharaohs. She served as one of the Eyes of Ra, taking on a vengeful aspect to protect him from his enemies. She

was also associated with joy, beauty, dance, music, love, sexuality, maternal care, and femininity in general. Hathor helped souls to transition to the afterlife. Her maternal and celestial aspects were frequently expressed by representing the goddess in the form of a cow, but she tended to be depicted as a woman wearing a horned headdress and sun disc. Other aspects of Hathor include a lioness, a cobra, and a sycamore tree.

Literature:

Ingrid Gamer-Wallert, Vermerk: Fundort unbekannt (Tübingen, 1997), no. 115, pp. 150-154, 283.