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HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS — COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

THE EXCELLENCE OF GREEK METALWORK

AN EARLY LACONIAN BRONZE WATER CONTAINER

At the end of the seventh century B.C. Sparta, as the capital of Laconia, the southeastern region of the Peloponnese, had conquered the neighbouring region of Messenia and reached its apex as a political and cultural centre on the Greek mainland. Known for its military character and achievements in later centuries, Sparta's earlier cultural splendor has been almost forgotten. Thanks to archaeology, with excavations in the ancient town of Sparta and the provinces of Laconia and Messenia, that picture has changed considerably. Moreover, after a century of modern interpretative studies, the much wider horizon of the cultural framework of which Sparta was the centre between 650 and the wars against Persia in 490 and 480 B.C., has become a tangible and often surprising reality to us. In the second half of the seventh century B.C. artifacts started to be produced in Sparta and Laconia which were widely appreciated in Greece and exported throughout the Mediterranean world, to the Balkans and even to the Celtic tribes north of the Alps. British excavations in Sparta between 1906–1910 and 1924–1928 revealed the remains of a rich production of objects carved in ivory and bone, lead figurines, pottery and bronze. Technical and artistic parallels for these objects were often found in the areas to which they were exported, and this has made it

possible for modern specialists to identify their origin.

The question how that period of cultural splendor between 650 and 480 B.C. came about is not easy to answer. The Spartans lived under the same conditions as other Greeks on the mainland, for example the Corinthians and the Athenians. It was a period of new contacts with the superior cultures of the Near East and Egypt, which influenced all these Greek city states. During this "orientalizing" period Sparta developed a special relationship with the island of Samos. Samos became the Spartan "door" to the East. Artists from Samos, such as the famous architect and bronze worker Theodoros, came to Sparta (between 575–550 B.C.) to implement an important state commission: the construction of a new building for the assembly of the people. Artists from Sparta travelled to Samos and even settled there. A lively exchange, from which the Spartans greatly benefited, can be adduced as the main catalytic agent for the cultural achievements of the Spartans in this early period.

The bronze water container, *hydria* in Greek, which has recently come to enrich the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts is a fine and exceptionally well-preserved example of a kind of bronze vessel in which the Spartan or Laconian bronze workers of the above mentioned period specialized.



The Greeks drank their wine mixed with water; so a *hydria* was an essential part of the equipment for their drinking-parties (*symposia*). Laconian bronze

water containers of this kind have been discovered, often in a fragmentary state, in the graves of the local nobilities in many countries, including Italy, Switzerland, Yugoslavia and Hungary. The Hungarian example, found in the tomb of a Scythian chieftain near Ártánd, not far from the Rumanian border in the Carpathian basin, is in the collection of the Hungarian National Museum in Budapest. It reached Ártánd from Sparta in the sixth century B.C., by an overland route through Yugoslavia or by the Adriatic Sea. The exact find place of the "new" *hydria* in the Museum of Fine Arts is regrettably unknown, but an alleged provenance from "the area of the Black Sea", as indicated by the art dealer from whom it was bought, is not improbable nor without interest. At the rim of this *hydria* two human heads, one at each side of the vertical handle attract our attention. At first glance they appear to be applied as separate pieces, but on closer examination they turn out to be linked to the handle by arms running underneath the overlapping rim. So they were cast in one piece with the handle. It should be stressed that human heads at the rim of a *hydria* are hitherto unique: where any heads are found they are usually animal heads, such as those of lions or rams or snakes. The style of these human heads, with their flat skull, low forehead under a straight band, big eyes under heavy, notched eyebrows, thick lips and rounded chin, can be compared with a known bronze head found in Olympia, though attributed, with good arguments, to a Samian workshop. There are also terra-cotta figurines found on Samos itself, which seem to be rather close in style to the heads on this *hydria*. The relationship with Samos is significant, as noted above. The style of the human heads of this *hydria* also turns out to be indicative for dating: it suggests that the *hydria* was made in the years around 625–615 B.C. At the lower attachment of the vertical handle we see the forepart of a lion flanked by a snake on each side. The snakes turn away from the viewer, their bodies outstretched in a curving line on the shoulder of the vase. The three animals serve both as reinforcement for the handle and as an embellishment. The rather aggressive attitude of the lion may, moreover, be understood as a device for averting evil, while the snakes might seem equally threatening to a thief or other foreign intruder. The style of the lions head, with its broad skull and short muzzle, its deep carving and setting of the eyes between heavy eyelids and brows, and the straight wrinkle emerging from between the eyes over the forehead, represents a type which we know from Laconian lions dating to the last quarter of the seventh century B.C.

The other elements of the decoration and the shape, such as the broad body of the vase (largest diameter 37.8 cm) which is almost the same as its height (40.0 cm),



the short and heavy shape of the grips, and the low, flaring foot, all contribute to the impression that we have before us a *hydria* which indeed belongs to the earliest production phase of such bronze vessels in Greece, as indicated above. As for the attribution, it might be clear that a Laconian workshop would have the most convincing claim, but there is the problem of Samos: we cannot exclude, mainly because of style of the human heads at the rim, the possibility that the vase is a product of that innovative centre. At present too little of the island's early bronze production has been preserved for us to decide. The strong economic and artistic ties between Samos and Sparta (Laconia) in that early period make it all the more difficult to attribute a vase like our *hydria* to one side or the other. Perhaps the alleged provenance, the region of the Black Sea, may give us a hint: the Greek colonies on the coast of the Black Sea traditionally belonged to an East Greek sphere of influence and Samos formed part of this world.

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