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A FINGER RING DEPICTING PTOLEMY VIII EUERGETES II

Hellenistic period, reign of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II, 170-163 and 145-116 BC

Gold and garnet

2.6 cm x 1.9 cm x 2.3 cm, 11 grams

Suggested to have been created in Alexandria, Egypt

FGA-ARCH-GR-0030

Due diligence

From the collection of Victor Adda (1885-1965), born in Alexandria, Egypt, which he reportedly acquired in Egypt in the early part of the 20th Century; thence by descent to the owner who consigned it to Christie's.

Previous publications

BIANCHI, Robert Steven, "Anello con ritratto di Tolemeo XI Soter II", in GENTILI, Giovanni (ed.), *Cleopatra. Roma e l'incantesimo dell'Egitto*, exhibition cat. [Roma, Chiostro del Bramante, 12 ottobre 2013-2 febbraio 2014], Geneva and Milan, 2013, p. 253, n° 20.

Cleopatra y la fascinación de Egipto, exhibition cat. [Madrid, Centro de Exposiciones Arte Canal, 3 de diciembre 2015 - 8 de mayo 2016], Madrid and Milan, 2015, p. 247, n° 28.

Christie's *Antiquities*, 5259, London, 85 Old Brompton Road, 27 October 2009, p. 40-41, lot n° 119.

JUCKER, Hans, WILLERS, Dietrich, *Gesichter: Griechische und römische Bildnisse aus Schweizer Besitz. Ausstellung im Bernischen Historischen Museum, vom 6. November 1982 bis 6. Februar 1983*, Bern, Archäologisches Seminar der Universität Bern, 1982, p. 281, n. 133.

RESELLINI, Marc (dir.), *Le mythe de Cléopâtre*, exhibition cat. [Paris, Pinacothèque, 10 avril-7 septembre 2014], Paris, Pinacothèque de Paris, 2014, p. 44, n° 18.

SPIER, Jeffrey, "A Group of Ptolemaic Garnets", *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 47 (1989), p. 21-38, n° 4.

Finger rings, in the form of simple circles¹ created by cutting the horns of animals into the desired shape or drilling holes into small stones, first appear in Egypt during the Badarian cultural-historical phase of Egypt's Neolithic Period about 4500 BC². Over time the ancient Egyptians developed a number of different designs for finger rings, but the first cast examples featuring three dimensional bezels appeared during the reign of the boy-pharaoh Tutankhamun³. Finger rings were so highly prized by the ancient Egyptians that one temple inventory records the presence of thirty-one finger rings in red jasper, 331 finger rings in turquoise, and an astounding 4,247 examples in faience⁴.

Over the course of time, other cultures in the Mediterranean basin also developed a repertoire of their own for finger rings. Eventually they were universally worn for a number of shared purposes, such as enhancing their owner's appearance, advertising their economic and social status, and, in some cases, serving amuletic functions⁵. The Greeks prized their rings, often keeping examples as precious heirlooms. Greek men and women developed the habit of dedicating their jewelry to a specific deity in order to obtain divine favor, particularly to Asclepius, god of healing, in order to seek cures for illness⁶. Perhaps in keeping with the practice of Greek men of the 5th century BC whose only fashion accessory was a finger ring because they avoided wearing bracelets and necklaces, men habitually dedicated finger rings exclusively for that purpose⁷.

In antiquity an individual could wear any number of rings on a single or several fingers. But the modern practice of wearing a wedding band on the fourth finger of the right hand in some European countries ultimately derives from physicians in Egypt, particularly those practicing in Alexandria. Those physicians suggested that there was a small vein in that finger that led directly to the heart; that suggestion itself originated from a pharaonic Egyptian practice of placing a ring on that finger as an amulet to protect its wearer from malevolent forces, in particular those caused by Sakhmet, the fierce lioness goddess⁸. On the other hand, the modern practice of wearing a single ring on the fourth or ring finger of the left hand is indebted to the ancient Romans⁹.

Finger rings might also be used as signet rings, exhibiting a design, which could be impressed into a soft material, generally in the form of a lump of clay, in order to seal letters and a variety of

¹ ANDREWS, *Ancient Egyptian Jewellery*, p. 163.

² TETTER, *Before the pyramids*, p. 8.

³ ANDREWS, *Ancient Egyptian Jewellery*, p. 166.

⁴ GRANDET, *Le Papyrus Harris I*, p. 315-316.

⁵ WILLIAMS, OGDEN, *Greek gold*, p. 31; ERTMAN, "Finger rings", p. 68-73; and KOTANSKY, "Incantations and prayers", p. 110-111.

⁶ WILLIAMS, OGDEN, *Greek gold*, p. 32.

⁷ WILLIAMS, OGDEN, *Greek gold*, p. 32.

⁸ AUFRÈRE, "Le cœur, l'annulaire gauche", p. 21-34.

⁹ MA, *Statues and cities*, p. 282-283.

documents. This finger ring in the collections of the FGA served just such a purpose. The practice of sealing official documents can be traced back as early as the Neolithic Period in the Ancient Near East¹⁰. It gained wide currency in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom¹¹. The practice continued and became wide-spread in the empires controlled by the generals of Alexander the Great after his death, as the sealings, or impressions, found by the thousands¹², made by such signet rings expressly for sealing written documents reveal¹³.

The fact that this ring was formerly in the collection of Victor Adda strongly supports the observation that it was created in Hellenistic Alexandria during the Ptolemaic Period (305/4 - 30 BC). Although Hellenistic Alexandria is not particularly known as a leading center for the production of jewelry¹⁴, the Ptolemaic court did maintain its own “dactylothèque,” or an atelier of jewelers and engravers, in which such rings were specifically created¹⁵. This particular signet ring is designed as an oval loop with a flat bezel. It was cast using the lost wax technique¹⁶. The cast was designed so that the intaglio, in the form of a male bust facing left, could later be added to the bezel's cavity. The intaglio was probably carved by an engraver working the garnet and certainly collaborating very closely with the goldsmith casting the ring, in order to insure the perfect joining of the two separate elements. The quality of the carving of the portrait in the garnet is exceptionally high, characteristic of that of the small number of massively sized signet rings of the period¹⁷.

The portrait on the intaglio doubtless represents one of the Hellenistic Greek pharaohs of Ptolemaic Egypt. The corpulent features of his face are dominated by a large, wide open eye, set into a deep socket framed above by a heavy eye brow. The aquiline nose exhibits a flaring nostril above a mouth, the fleshy upper lip of which is shorter than the lower, and set off from the round, golf-ball shaped protruding chin. His thick, curly hair is held in place by a wide diadem, the streamers of which fall over his shoulder. His otherwise clean shaven face features curly mutton chops.

¹⁰ WALLENFELS, *Hellenistic seal impressions*, p. 1-2.

¹¹ PAYRAUDEAU, “Nespanétjerendjerâ”, p. 81-94.

¹² KYRIELEIS, *Hellenistische Herrscherporträts*, p. 15, estimates that there were about 11,000 such sealings found at Paphos; and INVERNIZZI, “Séleucie du Tigre”, p. 180-185, states that some 30,000 sealings were found in the so-called archives of the city of Seleucia on the Tigris. We are involved in the Edfu Connection, an international collaboration studying the estimated 800 sealings reportedly from the Egyptian site of Edfu, available at: <<http://www.allardpiersonmuseum.nl/collectie-onderzoek/onderzoek/edfu-connection/edfu-connection.html>> (viewed on 7 February 2017).

¹³ DREYER, FISCHER-ELFERT, HEITZ, “Stadt und Tempel”, p. 220, for a reconstruction of how such a papyrus document could have been folded and sealed.

¹⁴ HOFFMANN, DAVIDSON, *Greek gold*, p. 15.

¹⁵ QUEYREL, “Ekphrasis et perception alexandrine”, p. 30-33.

¹⁶ WILLIAMS, OGDEN, *Greek gold*, p. 50.

¹⁷ HOFFMANN, DAVIDSON, *Greek gold*, p. 8.



Spier¹⁸ lists this gem and four others which are similar (two in Bloomington, Indiana, a third in Munich, and the fourth in the Petrie Museum), all of which he claims represent the same ruler, but the Adda example in the collections of the FGA is the only one of the four still in its original setting. All five members of this group appear to have been designed according to a common model. The identification of this specific monarch can be suggested by comparison with similar images on coin portraits¹⁹ as well as on sealings²⁰. Together these form a constellation of like images, the physiognomic features of which most closely match those of representations identified as Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II. His obesity was so well-known and celebrated in antiquity that he was nick-named *physkon*, “pot-belly”.

This signet ring was in all probably not the personal property of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II. It may have been used by a high official in his administration to judge from the impressions on the sealings from Edfu, discussed above, or it might even have been a royal gift to an influential political ally²¹, sometimes politely refused so as to avoid the impression of being bribed²².

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¹⁸ SPIER, “A Group of Ptolemaic Garnets”, p. 21-38.

¹⁹ KYRIELEIS, *Bildnisse der Ptolemäer*, p. 63-64.

²⁰ KYRIELEIS, *Hellenistische Herrscherporträts*, p. 35-36.

²¹ PLANTZOS, *Hellenistic engraved gems*, p. 45-46.

²² LIGHTFOOT, “Royal patronage”, p. 81.



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