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*Shell*

Greece or Southern Italy, 2<sup>nd</sup> - 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

Silver, hammered and engraved

10.5 x 15.3 x 2 cm

FGA-ARCH-GR-0112

**Provenance**

Former Swiss collection gathered in the 1980s.

Bought at Pierre Bergé & Associés, 25 May 2016, lot n° 195.

Unpublished



## **The woman, the pearl and the shellfish: an inscribed shell of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art**

The archaeological and ethnological collections of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art include several shells, which bear witness to the amazement of mankind at marine fauna. If ancient metal-crafted shells are extremely rare, this one is even more striking, as it bears an inscription engraved on its surface. The few letters displayed on this artefact invite us to reconsider the importance of shells in ancient religious practices.

### *Shellfishes in the Greek world*

A thin and fragile ribbed husk of silver, this piece represents a stylized shell valve, perhaps freely inspired by the valves of a pecten. If just over two millennia have passed since it was produced, implying wear such as small missing bits and cracks, this sharp-serrated shell still emits something supernatural as if it came from the workshop of a visionary silversmith who, without paying too much attention to realistic details, did his best to reveal its quintessence.

Although they were known by a few words only, such as *ostrea* or *konchos*, which seem interchangeable and do not reflect the diversity of species known to the Greeks<sup>1</sup>, shellfishes were regarded as treasures of the sea<sup>2</sup>. Cockles, pectens, giant clams, tun shells, nautilus, cowries and other shellfish species which dwelled in the Mediterranean or the Red Sea were always prized by the Ancients. If they recognized their dual nature, both mineral and animal, they considered that the shell, which was associated with stone, was more valuable than the animal it sheltered<sup>3</sup>.

Symbolically important, shells were even depicted on coins (notably from Tarentum) since the early 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. But the Greeks would also see subtle similarities between shells and vessels<sup>4</sup>, as the concavity of the former naturally predisposes them to be used as containers. A source of inspiration for artists, the simple or complex beauty of shells was imitated in noble materials (gold, silver, bronze, marble, glass) during the entire Antiquity. In the classical world, we notably know a 'pelican's foot' made of marble and dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, which imitates the sea snail of the same name<sup>5</sup>, and the body of some aryballois is fashioned to imitate a bivalve (*fig. 1*)<sup>6</sup>. Besides, the

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<sup>1</sup> ZUCKER, "Album mythique", p. 121; see also VILLARD, "Les analogies entre coquillages et vases", p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> STEIER, "Muscheln", in *Real Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* XVI, 1 (1933), c. 774-796.

<sup>3</sup> ZUCKER, "Album mythique", p. 113-114.

<sup>4</sup> VILLARD, "Les analogies entre coquillages et vases", p. 84 sq.

<sup>5</sup> Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession Number 1995.19.

<sup>6</sup> Louvre, inv. H 188 (CP 3578) et H 187 (S 1470), 5<sup>th</sup> century BC; see also ZUCKER, "Album mythique", p. 114, fig. 4.



magnificent blue glass cup of the Steinhardt collection was inspired by a similar shell<sup>7</sup>. As to the Boscoreale treasure of the late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, it comprises a conch of hammered silver slightly larger than the shell of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, but technically and stylistically close to it<sup>8</sup> (fig. 2).

### *The offering of shells*

Due to the beauty of shellfishes, the Greeks would use them as offerings, sometimes in their natural form, sometimes as works of art imitating nature. Shells could be used as a humble funerary offering (some were found in child burials of the Kerameikos<sup>9</sup>, and terracotta shells were found in tombs of the Hellenistic period in Myrina and Southern Italy<sup>10</sup>), but it was mainly a present offered to the gods. But to which gods? And by whom?

Sanctuary inventories—like those of Delos, and notably the one of Aphrodite-Arsinoe Philadelphos, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC—are filled with references to shells<sup>11</sup>. Sometimes silver-plated, sometimes enhanced with elements of gilded wood, they were displayed inside the temple on small wooden columns<sup>12</sup>. The recipient gods were Apollo, god of promontories (to thank him for a miraculous catch of fish)<sup>13</sup>, the Nymphs, goddesses of marine caves<sup>14</sup> and, of course, the fair Aphrodite. In a graceful epigram, Callimachus gives voice to a shell (in this case, a nautilus) offered to the goddess by a young maid<sup>15</sup>. The nautilus was probably dedicated to Aphrodite as a sign of gratefulness, perhaps to thank her for allowing a successful seafaring, as the maid had been travelling from Smyrna to Alexandria<sup>16</sup>. This custom was confirmed by excavations, as shells of giant tuns (*Tonnae Galeae*) were discovered among the votive material of the sanctuary of Aphrodite at Amathus, on the island of Cyprus.

<sup>7</sup> CHAMAY, “Antiquité: coupe aux pêcheurs”, p. 44-45.

<sup>8</sup> Louvre, inv. Bj 1996: Antoine HÉRON DE VILLEFOSSE, *Le trésor de Boscoreale*, Paris, 1899, p. 258-259, pl. XXX, n° 1; BARATTE, *Le trésor d'orfèvrerie*, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> STROSZECK, “Grave Gifts...”, p. 57-75.

<sup>10</sup> Simone BESQUES, *Catalogue raisonné des figurines et reliefs en terre-cuite grecs, étrusques et romains. 2. Myrina*, Paris, 1963, p. 150, inv. Myrina 1757, pl. 189, e; Simone BESQUES, *Catalogue raisonné des figurines et reliefs en terre-cuite grecs, étrusques et romains. 4. Époques hellénistique et romaine. Italie méridionale, Sicile, Sardaigne*, Paris, 1986, p. 89, D 3811, pl. 81, h. Similar offerings of isolated shells were found in the Hellenistic necropolis of Salamina (Cyprus), see Vassos KARAGEORGHIS, *Excavations in the Necropolis of Salamis IV*, Nicosia, 1978, p. 24-26.

<sup>11</sup> VALLOIS, “Le temple délien”, p. 34-35; Ph. BRUNEAU, *Recherches sur les cultes de Délos à l'époque impériale*, Paris, 1970, p. 536, 541, 544.

<sup>12</sup> PRÉTRE, “Le matériel votif à Délos”, p. 393.

<sup>13</sup> For instance a horn-shaped shell offered to a musician god (*Anthologie Palatine*, 230): MAZAUBERT, “Les dieux marins”, p. 319.

<sup>14</sup> *Anthologie Palatine*, 224; MAZAUBERT, “Les dieux marins”, p. 322.

<sup>15</sup> Callimachus, *Epigram*, 5; GUTZWILLER, “The Nautilus”, p. 194-209.

<sup>16</sup> VALLOIS, “Le temple délien”, p. 35; interpretation followed by GUTZWILLER, “The Nautilus”, p. 197.



### *Shells for the pearl-goddess*

More than any other island, Cyprus was the domain of Aphrodite. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, shells of the 'dirty cowry' species (*Erosaria Spurcae*) worn as necklaces by young women depicted on small terracotta plaques, were directly associated with the feminine sex because of their shape. These ornaments probably identified them as being under the protection of Aphrodite, goddess of love and fecundity<sup>17</sup>. In Greece and Southern Italy, it is mainly since the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC that bivalve shells become an attribute or even a symbol of Aphrodite<sup>18</sup>. Indeed, the fair goddess, conceived by the semen of Ouranos fallen on the water, was said to have been born of a bivalve shell<sup>19</sup> and to have thus sailed to the island of Cythera. Terracotta figures show her kneeling in a shell surrounding and protecting her<sup>20</sup>. Aphrodite seems to enjoy these shells, which represent both her divine cradle and her craft. On a painting in Pompeii, the goddess is depicted lying in a serrated bivalve shell similar to ours, in a situation which visually identifies her to the gemstone of a pearl oyster (*Pinctada Margaritifera*)<sup>21</sup>. After all, Aphrodite is the fairest of all goddesses, just like the pearl is queen over the seas. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, these two could represent one another<sup>22</sup>.

### *Shells and the beauty of women*

Due to this close association with Aphrodite, goddess of beauty and love, goldsmiths drew their inspiration from shells to produce several precious objects related to beauty, such as pecten-shaped cosmetic boxes (as in Paternò, Sicily, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC)<sup>23</sup> or precious ablution cups<sup>24</sup>, like the ones used by the women depicted in the House of Menander at Pompeii<sup>25</sup>. The Fondation Gandur pour l'Art's shell was probably originally meant as a cup used for body care. But it conceals a specificity which makes it even more precious: it bears an inscription, which finally brings us to the woman mentioned in the title of the present note.

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<sup>17</sup> Isabelle TASSIGNON, "Déesse - prostituée - initiée ? Une proposition d'interprétation des 'plaquettes d'Astarté' chypriotes", in Sylvie DONNAT (éd.), *Nude Female Statuettes. Actes du colloque Nude Female Statuettes, Strasbourg, 25-27 juin 2015*, Paris, 2018, p. 309-318.

<sup>18</sup> VON MEYENBURG, "Muschel- und Schneckenheimnisse", p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> According to a late literary tradition: Plautus, *Rudens* (The Rope), 704 ('it is said that you were born of a shell, and that their own shells do not repel you'). See also Statius, *Silvae*, I, 2, 117-118; DELIVORRIAS *et al.*, "Aphrodite", in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* II (1984), p. 103-104, n° 1011-1017.

<sup>20</sup> From Panticapaeum: Simone BESQUES, *Catalogue raisonné des figurines et reliefs en terre-cuite grecs, étrusques et romains. 3. Époques hellénistique et romaine. Grèce et Asie Mineure*, Paris, 1971-1972, D 313. See also the pelike from Thessaloniki dated 370-360, reproduced in ZUCKER, "Album mythique", p. 113, where the goddess emerges from a bivalve shell with serrated edges.

<sup>21</sup> THOMAS, *Coquillages*, p. 102-103; ZUCKER, "Album mythique", p. 112.

<sup>22</sup> ZUCKER, "Album mythique", p. 112-113.

<sup>23</sup> BARATTE, *Le trésor d'orfèvrerie*, p. 54.

<sup>24</sup> In the archaeological material of house I 9,5 in Pompeii, see ALLISON, *Pompeian Households*, p. 54.

<sup>25</sup> ALLISON, *Pompeian Households*, p. 55.



### *Writing one's name on a shell*

A Greek inscription in capital letters runs below the second ridge from the right (*fig. 3*). In fact, this should rather be termed a graffito, as the irregular and unadjusted letters are lightly engraved in the metal. The person who inscribed these few signs did not have a good command of writing and this task must have represented quite an effort, but one can feel that it was done with painstaking care. The letters read ΚΥΛΑΚΑ (*Kulaka*), followed by a small square, a word without equivalent today. Considering what precedes on the link between shells and women, the most likely hypothesis is that we are dealing with a woman's first name in the nominative form. Although this first name is so far unattested in Greek onomastics, names formed on the root *Kul(l)a* are known throughout the Greek world<sup>26</sup>. In this case again, it must come from a Hellenized region of the Mediterranean basin, Greece or Southern Italy. One can therefore surmise that 'Kulaka' is the name of the person who, for some time, was the owner of this cosmetic utensil: a woman who, one day, dedicated it to a goddess—possibly Aphrodite—in the hope of receiving her assistance or to thank her for it. It is thus a feminine offering, made by a woman for a goddess of women, which is reminiscent of the gift of the nautilus by the young Smyranean girl in the above-mentioned epigram<sup>27</sup>.

To conclude, this silver shell must be assigned to the rare yet well-attested production of shell-shaped artefacts inspired by nature, which can temptingly be connected to the cult of Aphrodite. The formal similarities it shares with the Boscoreale conch encourage us to date it to the end of the Hellenistic period.

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<sup>26</sup> Friedrich BECHTEL, *Die historischen Personennamen des Griechischen bis zur Kaiserzeit*, Halle, 1917, notably: *Inscriptiones Graecae* II2, 2115, 2237, 4150. In Athens (Εκυλλα / Ekulla): Michael J. OSBORNE, Sean G. BYRNE, *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, II, Oxford, 1994, p. 139, around 323 BC; in Samos (Εκυλλα / Ekulla): Peter Marshall FRASER, Elaine MATTHEWS, *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, I, Oxford, 1987, p. 278; in Kerkyra (Κυλλα / Kulla): Peter Marshall FRASER, Elaine MATTHEWS, *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, III A, Oxford, 1997, A, p. 261, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.

<sup>27</sup> As already suggested by VALLOIS, "Le temple délien", p. 35.



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*Illustrations complémentaires*



Fig. 1 © Musée du Louvre



Fig. 2 © Musée du Louvre



Fig. 3 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: André Longchamp