

INTRODUCTION

Inside a shallow drinking or libation bowl of dazzling, multilayered, semi-precious sardonyx (Figure 1) – cream, red-brown, and almost eight inches wide – an idyllic scene emerges. Carved *cameo*¹-fashion into the creamy third layer of this huge, semitranslucent gemstone, eight figures compete for our attention.

At center, a vigorous young man, clad only in a skimpy loincloth, holds a seed bag, a knife, and a bow-shaped object that an ancient viewer would have recognized as the shaft of a plough. At left, a bearded old man (also bare-chested but much less sexy) sits against a tree and holds a horn of plenty, or *cornucopia*. Below them, a bare-breasted woman (a surefire attention-getter rediscovered on European beaches in the 1960s), in Egyptian Isis dress and with an Egyptian hairdo, reclines on a sphinx and holds two ears of grain. Suggestively, the cornucopia, plough shaft, and grain all line up just to the left of center.

At right recline two other women, also topless and nearly as well endowed as the one on the sphinx. The first proffers a bowl somewhat like the one under discussion, and the second reclines against a sheaf of wheat and holds another cornucopia. Finally, two comely youths, naked but for their billowing cloaks, soar across the sky above, one blowing a conch shell and the other turning to watch him. Meanwhile, on the bowl's underside, a huge Gorgon's head, or *Gorgoneion*, wreathed with writhing snakes, glares balefully at anyone tempted to disturb the drinker as he tilts it to imbibe.

As for the bowl's material, sardonyx is a variant of onyx, a banded chalcedony so named because its internal layers are cream-colored, like the tip of a fingernail (*onyx* in Greek), and its colored bands are shades of red, or *sard*

1 For this and other technical terms, see the Glossary on p. 301.



1. The Tazza Farnese, ca. 150–30. This sardonyx bowl is a spectacular example of an authentically Ptolemaic invention: the *cameo*. The Nile/Osiris River (left) and Euthenia (“Bounty”; seated on a sphinx) watch Horus/Triptolemos appear with a seed bag, knife, and plough, as the Seasons (right) and Etesian Winds (above) look on; a huge *Gorgoneion*

(allegedly because it was first identified at Sardis in western Anatolia),² rather than black. Consisting of fine intergrowths of quartz and moganite, onyx is *cryptocrystalline*: formed of crystals that are almost invisible even under a microscope. Its colored bands run more or less parallel to each other, encouraging this kind of carving in relief, whereas the chaotic banding of agates is far better suited to engraving, or *intaglio*, work.

Used in Egypt as early as the third millennium BC for bowls and cups, onyx also was worked on Minoan Crete a millennium later, and it even appears at both ends of the Bible. In *Genesis*, it is said to come from the land of Havilah, probably the Hejaz Mountains of Yemen, and in *Revelation*, it is a prime component of the foundations of the City of God. Greek and Latin writers, however, knew that sardonyx itself came from India (although a German geologist now has located a source in Bulgaria). In modern gem lore, some of which goes back to antiquity, it confers strength and protection, enhancing willpower, integrity, stamina, and vigor. Supposedly it brings lasting happiness and stability to marriages and partnerships, and attracts friends and good fortune – reasons enough for its employment here, because in antiquity, drinking was always social.

One of the hardest semiprecious stones, scoring 7 out of 10 on the Mohs hardness scale, (sard)onyx is as hard as steel and is exceeded only by emerald and topaz at 8, corundum at 9, and diamond at 10. To carve it therefore required enormous skill and patience – workshop specialties in the Ptolemaic capital, Alexandria.

Having acquired it as a raw geode (a limestone nodule with a chalcedony core), the artist first would have cut it down to size, removing the limestone and about twenty to thirty percent of the core in order to get rid of its jagged edges, cracks, and other imperfections. Originally, then, the core must have been at least 10 inches – over 25 centimeters – in diameter: a rarity then and unheard of today. Then he would have heated it to intensify its color; polished it; and carved it with a fine drill, tiny chisels, and powdered corundum (a cutting agent) mixed with olive oil. The whole process, experts estimate, may have taken several years. (A replica made in Germany with modern power tools took more than six months.)

So the rewards that this bowl offers are simultaneously material, magical, aesthetic, sensory, sensual, and intellectual: delight at its colors, translucency, texture, and feel; happiness at its beneficial magical properties; awe at its size, rarity, intricacy, and virtuosity; pleasure at its delicacy, beauty, and

1. (*continued*)

decorates its underside. Proclaiming the benefits of Ptolemaic rule, it shows Hellenistic art at its finest, most complex, and most enigmatic. Its date, imagery, and patron(s) are controversial. It is uninscribed, cannot be dated stylistically, and idealizes its protagonists, inhibiting identification with particular Ptolemaic rulers. Diam. 8 in. (20 cm). Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

2 For the sources of all quotations and references, see References on p. 333. Anatolia is roughly equivalent to present-day Turkey; often it is also called Asia Minor.

vividness; glee at its sensuous displays of naked flesh; and finally satisfaction at decoding its message – if one can.

A DISH FOR A KING

This dazzling object is known as the Tazza Farnese after its penultimate owners, an Italian princely family. (“Tazza” is Italian for “cup,” “bowl,” or “dish.”) From its first documented appearance in AD 1239, its history reads like a Medieval and Renaissance *Who’s Who*. Acquired in that year by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II from two itinerant merchants, it graced the courts of Samarkand, Aragon, Florence, Vienna, and Rome before eventually ending up in Naples.

Yet its elegant figured scene was first deciphered only in 1900 by the great German archaeologist Adolf Furtwängler. He realized that it celebrates the rule of the Ptolemies, the dynasty founded in Egypt in 323 by one of Alexander the Great’s generals,³ Ptolemy son of Lagos, and dated it to the *Hellenistic* period.⁴ If – as is likely – the Tazza was made in Alexandria for the Ptolemies and predates the death in 30 of the last of them, Kleopatra VII (Figure 2), perhaps it first reached Europe as Roman loot.

A masterpiece both of Hellenistic craftsmanship and royal self-promotion, the Tazza vividly highlights some key aspects of Hellenistic art and thus of the chapters that follow. It deserves a closer look.

THE DECIPHERMENT

For the most part, Furtwängler’s decipherment of the Tazza still stands, although other scholars have modified it somewhat and particularly have challenged his early Hellenistic (third-century) date for the piece. Rival interpretations of the scene have appeared from time to time, but mostly are based on false premises or the belief that it is an *allegory* – “a figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another” – in short, a riddle.

Furtwängler realized that any interpretation must start from the sphinx and the voluptuous woman reclining on it. Because the sphinx must represent Egypt, the bare-breasted woman reclining on it should be the goddess Euthenia, the personification of abundance and consort of the life-giving Nile River. Alexandrian sculptures and coins often show her in this guise, ears of grain included. So the bearded old man with the cornucopia must be the Nile himself, the source of Egypt’s prosperity and Euthenia’s husband (in his Egyptian persona as Osiris, god of the Underworld, the earth, and its fruits – the Nile included). The youth striding between them with the seed bag, knife,

3 Henceforth, all dates are B.C. unless otherwise specified or obviously not so (e.g., in the previous sentence, “the elegant scene . . . was first deciphered only in 1900”).
4 “Hellenistic” simply means “late Greek.” Coined in the nineteenth century, the term describes Greek art and culture from Alexander’s death in 323 through the last Ptolemaic ruler, Kleopatra VII, the Roman conquest of her kingdom in 30, and the foundation of the Roman Empire.



2. Queen Kleopatra VII Philopator Thea of Egypt (reigned 51–30). This superb marble portrait was carved for insertion in a draped body, probably of a different stone. On her coins, she is sharp-featured, with a prominent chin and aquiline nose, and Plutarch notes that she was not conventionally beautiful. This portrait idealizes her in the guise of her divine avatar, Aphrodite, and her great predecessor, the deified Queen Arsinoe II, sister-wife of Ptolemy II Philadelphos from 275 to 269. H 11 1/2 in. (29.5 cm). Berlin, Staatliche Museen (Antikensammlung).

and plough must then be their son, Horus (Greek Triptolemos), to whom the gods gave grain to sow upon the earth.

As for the spectators, the two other topless women should be two of the three Egyptian Seasons. The one with the cup signals the Nile flood that began in mid-July of each year, and the one reclining on the wheat sheaf represents the harvest in March/April. Finally, the two flying youths at the top must be the Etesian Winds (the modern *Meltemi*), which blow into Egypt from the north in June and were popularly thought to trigger the flood by backing up the river. The message is clear, definitely not riddling (despite its richness and complexity), and easily summarized. Egypt flourishes under Ptolemaic rule, beloved by the gods.

Yet research is never static. In particular, some now think that the sphinx, Euthenia, and Horus/Triptolemos should represent actual members of the Ptolemaic ruling family (King, Queen, and Crown Prince, respectively), especially since their accessories, or *attributes*, all line up, and Euthenia seems to wear a royal ribbon, or *diadem*, in her hair. But if so, which Ptolemies? Suggested candidates include several late second-century ones; the aforementioned last ruler of the dynasty, Kleopatra VII (Figure 2); and even the first Roman governor of Egypt, the soldier-poet Gaius Cornelius Gallus.⁵

Within its diminutive compass (eight inches, eight figures), then, the Tazza embraces the entire world of the Ptolemies: their home, their inheritance, their wealth, and their hopes – literally a cameo kingdom. Yet it bears no inscription; the styles of its figures are not specific to any particular era but were chosen to fit each particular character from the assortment then available; and their faces are generic also – like most Ptolemaic portraits, presumably in order to advertise the regime's solidarity, stability, and perfection, but inhibiting individual identification. The debate continues.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

This debate raises a number of issues that are particularly characteristic of Hellenistic art, as follows:

- The Tazza is an exotic luxury object, exquisitely crafted for the wealthy elite – a Ptolemaic courtier, one of the royal family, or perhaps even the king or queen themselves.
- It testifies to the regime's unprecedented command of scarce resources, both material and human.
- It adapts the imagery and art styles of the classical Greek city states, or *poleis* (singular *polis*) to the Hellenistic world of kings, courts, and empires.
- It blends these elements with others borrowed from the conquered and colonized.

5 Horus/Triptolemos wears a mustache but no beard, like the Gauls or Celts (see Figures 41–42), prompting the suggestion that he is punning on Gallus's name. Alternatively, as J.J. Pollitt once remarked, "is there some subtle political allusion (e.g., the need for beating swords into ploughshares) that we miss?"

- It offers a complex, self-referential, and multilayered (but not riddling) narrative about the prosperity of Egypt and its inhabitants under Ptolemaic rule.
- It makes liberal use of tendentious *personifications*, mixing them with “real” characters (mythological, historical, and contemporary), to create eye-catching, often politically charged, scenarios or “pageants.”
- It puts style to work politically, in that alongside its many symbols of prosperity, the voluptuous women evoke the opulence, or *tryphē* (see Chapters 1 and 9), that the Ptolemies claimed to epitomize their regime.⁶
- Its decipherment takes time, patience, insight, and some knowledge of Hellenistic history and culture, and thus remains an ongoing process.
- And finally, for all these reasons, it is hard to date.

Two thoughts come immediately to mind. First, to classify the Tazza – an elite object of dazzling sophistication – among the so-called minor arts (a modern label, not an ancient one), is simply absurd. Indeed, not least *because of* its small size, it casts most of the monumental sculptures and paintings in this book into the shade. The value-free term “luxury crafts,” which carries no such pejorative connotations, is far better.

Secondly, in order to understand any of this, we require some knowledge of the Tazza’s *context* – real or reconstructed. Contexts delimit options, focus interpretations, enrich meanings, and open doors to understanding. Without knowing, for example, who these Ptolemies were, where and when they ruled, and what they did, said, and aspired to, our take on the Tazza would be impoverished indeed, perhaps even comically wrong.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND THE
HELLENISTIC WORLD

Yet even so, any reader who has never heard of the Ptolemies can be forgiven. Less than two centuries after they fell, and exaggerating only slightly, the savvy Roman-period traveler Pausanias confessed that, “The age of Attalos and Ptolemy is so remote that memory of it has perished, and the writings of the historians whom the kings got to record their deeds fell into neglect still sooner.”⁷ So, although these dynasties were among the Hellenistic world’s luckiest and most powerful, later Greeks and Romans had to be reminded who they were.

One reason for this collective amnesia about Alexander’s successors was his own uniqueness (Figure 3). Only the heroes of legend and, eventually, the gods offered any kind of a precedent. Just five-and-a-half feet tall and barely out of his teens, but a colossus beyond compare, he dwarfed them

6 A second-century Ptolemaic princess and a first-century Ptolemaic queen were even named *Tryphaina*, “Opulent One,” and the father of the first of them, Ptolemy VIII Euergetes, was so obese that the Alexandrians nicknamed him *Physkon*, “Fatso.”

7 Attalos: Attalos I Soter, a king of Hellenistic Pergamon (see Figures 33–34), who also will feature prominently in this book.

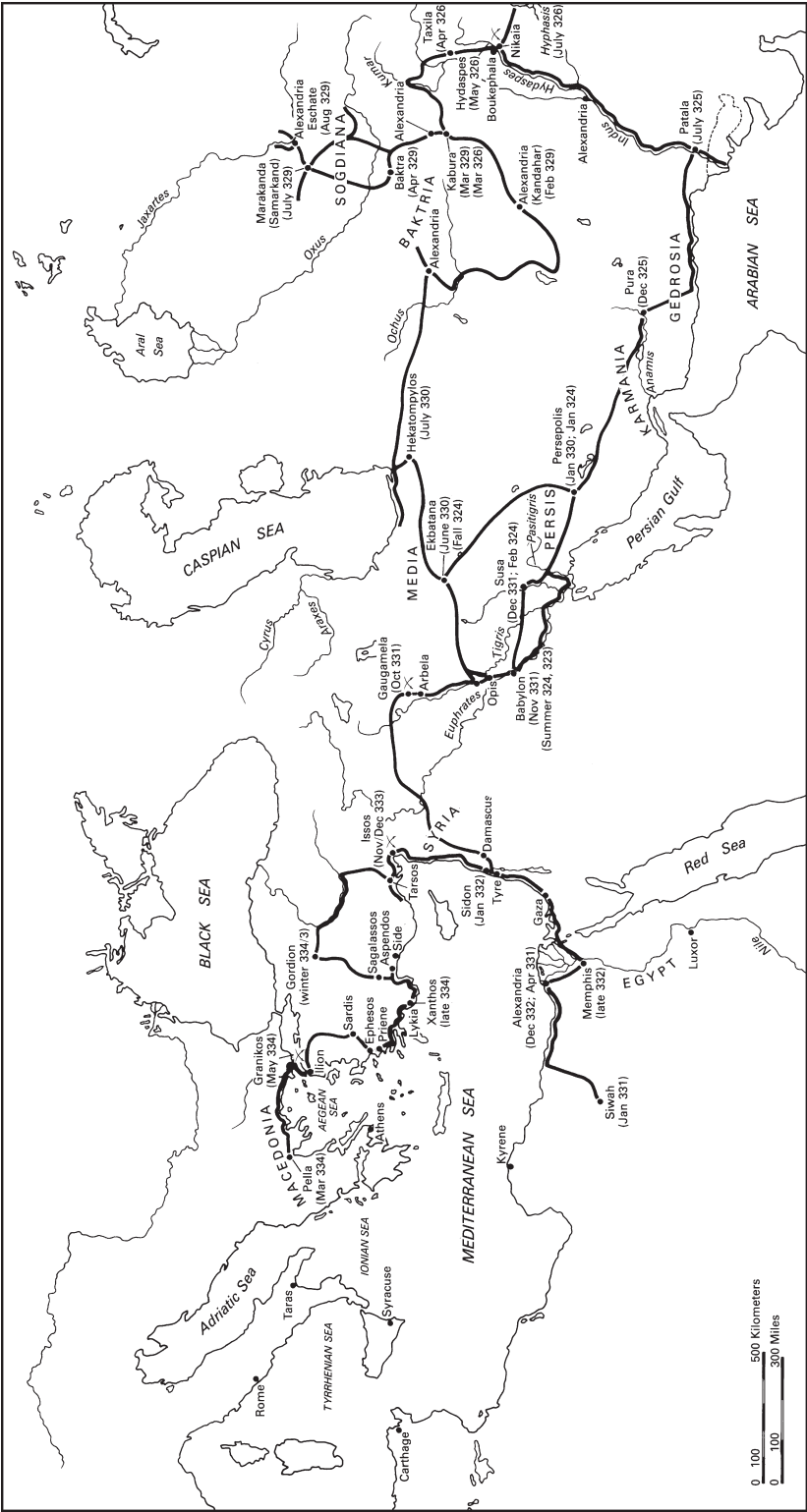


3. Alexander rides into battle, detail of the Alexander Mosaic from the House of the Faun at Pompeii (Figure 37), late second century, after a four-color painting of ca. 330–300. Determined to kill or capture King Darius, Alexander looks almost demonic, his lips pursed, eyes blazing, and hair streaming in the wind. The mosaic technique, known by its Latin name of *opus vermiculatum* (“wormy work”), imitates a painter’s palette and brushstrokes by using thousands of tiny, individually cut stone and glass cubes, or *tesserae*. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

all: predecessors, contemporaries, and successors combined. For the historical firestorm he ignited, see the Timeline at the end of this book.

Born in 356 to King Philip II of Macedon and his formidable wife, Olympias, Alexander burst upon the Greek world when only eighteen years old. In August 338, he led the cavalry charge that smashed the Athenian and Theban armies at Chaironeia in central Greece and established his father Philip as “leader” (*hēgemōn*) of the Greeks. Less than two years later, Philip fell to an assassin’s dagger while preparing to invade the Persian Empire, and Alexander unexpectedly found himself both king and heir to his father’s ambitions. A superb horseman, fearless fighter, military genius, ruthless administrator, and last but not least, a formidable drinker, he swiftly put down a Theban rebellion and invaded Persia in the spring of 336.

Conqueror of Anatolia, Egypt, the Near East, and Persia at age twenty-five, and of Bactria (Afghanistan) and northwest India at age thirty, by 323 Alexander ruled the largest empire yet seen on this planet (Map 1): more than *two million* square miles of it. Ever striving to outdo his heroic ancestors, Herakles and Achilles, and allegedly keeping Homer’s *Iliad* under his pillow (all twenty-four books of it?), he regarded the king of the gods, Zeus-



Map 1. Map of Alexander's campaign of conquest. At his death on June 10, 323, he ruled 2 million square miles of the earth's surface: the largest empire yet seen on this planet.



4. The “Nelidow” Alexander, Hellenistic bronze statuette after a large-scale portrait of ca. 330 probably by Lysippos. Hand on hip and arm raised to hold his trademark spear (now lost), the king strides imperiously forward: a new Achilles waging a new Trojan War to the ends of the earth. The spear, its butt planted firmly on the ground, marked his conquests as “spear-won land,” which by Macedonian custom became royal property. The triumphant toss of his head inspired a contemporary couplet: “This statue seems to look at Father Zeus and say: / ‘You keep Olympos! Me let Earth obey!’” H 4 in. (10 cm). Cambridge, MA, Sackler Museum, Harvard University.