Coffin medallion with head of Medusa

Date
332-250 B.C.E.

Primary Maker
Unknown artist, Greek (Ancient)

Medium
Terracotta with remnants of pigment

Description
This depiction of the head of Medusa, originally brightly painted, was made by pressing red-brown Nile River silt into a one-piece mold. Such ceramic pieces, common in the Hellenistic Greek tradition, were produced en masse to adorn wood coffins and are often found in Egyptian cemeteries of the early Ptolemaic period, which began with Alexander the Great's annexation of Egypt in 332 BCE. The choice of motif here was probably apotropaic, in that the mythological monster's visage was intended to ward off evil. The medallion was excavated around 1884–87, probably under the direction of the British archaeologist William Matthew Flinders Petrie for the Egypt Exploration Fund at ancient Naukratis. The town of Naukratis, located in the western Nile delta and founded in the late seventh century BCE, was the earliest Greek settlement in Egypt. It became a central trading port linking Egypt and the Mediterranean, and, as a result, was a locus of dynamic cultural exchange. Between the end of the fourth century and the second century BCE, there were at least two terracotta workshops operating in Naukratis, where this medallion was likely made. Founded in 1882, the Egypt Exploration Fund was a private society that worked to promote the exploration of ancient Egyptian sites via individual subscriptions. The Reverend William C. Winslow, Class of 1862, H1886, was the founder of the American branch of the fund and acted at various times as its treasurer, secretary, and vice president. A number of Hamilton alumni were subscribers, including Professor of Classics Edward North, Class of 1841, and Winslow himself. This object is one of more than 150 antiquities excavated primarily in Egypt, many at Naukratis, that came to the College after Winslow's daughter's death in 1940. Earlier, upon his own death in 1925, Winslow had endowed a chair for the teaching of Greek and Latin at Hamilton College. (SOURCE: Alcauskas, INNOVATIVE APPROACHES, HONORED TRADITIONS, 2017) Egyptian terracotta coffin-fitting of Gorgon's head (Medusa); a decorative attachment for a wooden coffin. Mask of Medusa with curling hair falling on each side of her face; the chin is dimpled. Snakes tied above and below face. The back is concave, with a flattened edge where it came into contact with the wood of the coffin. The face was pressed into a one-piece mould. A white dressing was applied and the hair was painted. Red-brown Nile silt. (SOURCE: British Museum, "Naukratis: Greeks in Egypt," catalogue entry, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/online_research_catalogues/search_object_details.aspx?objectid=3605819&partid=1&searchText=wellin&numpages=12&output=bibliography/!!/OR/!!/8909/!//!/Naukratis:+Greeks+in+Egypt/!//!!//!!!/&sortBy=catNumber&orig=/research/publications/online_research_catalogues/russian_icons/catalogue_of_russian_icons.aspx&catalogueOnly=True&catparentPageId=35374&catalogueName=Naukratis:%20Greeks%20in%20Egypt&displayEssayResults=True&currentPage=1).

Dimensions
Overall: 3 3/16 in. × 3 1/8 in. × 1 in. (8.1 × 7.9 × 2.5 cm)