



Pilgrim flask depicting Saint Menas

Date

c. 610-650 C.E.

Medium

Terracotta

Description

In the Isaac Hollister Hall Collection in the Wellin, many of the objects have utilitarian functions. For instance, oil lamps served as light sources, amphorae stored oil and wine, and glass bottles held perfume. In addition to these, there are several objects in the collection that had specialized religious functions. One of these such objects is a pilgrim flask that served as a souvenir that pilgrims could purchase at a religious site, fill with holy oil or water, and take home as a memento of their experience. When I first came across this vessel, I wasn't sure what it was. The round and flat flask, referred to by archaeologists as an ampulla, had two handles on each side and was impressed with an image that was difficult to decipher due to centuries of exposure. Upon closer examination, I was able to discern the relief composition, which featured a man with outstretched arms and flanked by stylized animals. After searching through other museum's antiquity collections, I found numerous identical ampullae identified as pilgrim flasks with an image of Saint Menas. I learned that Saint Menas was a Christian martyr, who had a shrine built in his name

in the 4th century A.D. at Abu Mina in Egypt - a popular pilgrimage site. The flasks were mass-produced from the late 5th to the mid-7th century at the shrine, and archaeologists have discovered these Menas flasks in Palestine, Asia Minor, Greece and Cyprus. The Wellin's flask shares features with other Menas flasks produced c. 610-650, which was the most active time of production. The flasks from this period, including the one in the Wellin, feature Menas wearing military garb, flanked by two camels, in a praying pose with outstretched arms and surrounded by a frame of dots. Perhaps a Cypriot pilgrim visited the site in Egypt and purchased this flask as a souvenir, as archaeologists believe numerous other pilgrims to have done. (SOURCE: Ianna Recco '16, "Unpacking the Past: Object Highlight: Coptic-Egyptian pilgrim flask," Wellinformed blog (Spring 2016), <https://www.hamilton.edu/wellin/wellinformed/unpacking-the-past-object-highlight-1-1>) For a 3D scan of this object, see: <https://sketchfab.com/models/070d14afd5c14260bd3f3f08671943a4>

Dimensions

Overall: 4 1/16 x 2 3/4 x 11/16 in. (10.3 x 7 x 1.7 cm) Handle: 1 1/4 x 1/2 x 5/16 in. (3.1 x 1.2 x 0.8 cm) Mouth: 15/16 in. (2.4 cm)