

A close-up photograph of an ancient Egyptian stone sculpture fragment. The fragment shows the right side of a face, including the eye, nose, and cheek. Above the eye is a headdress with a series of vertical, ribbed bands. The stone is a light brown color with a rough, weathered texture. The word "COLNAGHI" is printed in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the top of the image.

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Egyptian, Late Dynastic Period, neo-Memphite,
30th Dynasty, ca. 380 – 343 B.C.,
Sculptor's trial piece fragment

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EGYPTIAN, LATE DYNASTIC PERIOD, NEO-MEMPHITE, 30TH DYNASTY
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SCULPTOR'S TRIAL PIECE FRAGMENT

Limestone
8 x 13.4 cm; 3 1/4 x 5 1/4 in.

Provenance

Prof. Dr. Roland Bay (1909-1992), Orselina, Switzerland; collection no. Ae. 12, acquired in the 1950s, thence by descent.

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This finely carved limestone fragment, representing the head of an Egyptian courtier in raised relief, belongs to the sophisticated sculptural tradition of the Thirtieth Dynasty, the final indigenous dynasty to rule an independent pharaonic Egypt before the renewed Achaemenid conquest. Although modest in scale and fragmentary in preservation, the work displays an exceptional degree of technical control. Its combination of a carefully idealised male profile, precisely articulated wig and apparently experimental passages of carving suggests that it was conceived as a sculptor's trial piece: an object on which an artist could practise or refine specific forms before transferring them to a finished monumental composition.

The courtier is shown in profile wearing an elaborately echeloned wig, whose individual curls have been rendered with remarkable sensitivity. Particularly revealing is the changing width of the locks: broader across the front of the head, they contract around the ear before widening once again towards the rear. Such modulation demonstrates that the sculptor was concerned not merely with producing a repetitive decorative pattern, but with adapting the geometry of the coiffure convincingly to the underlying structure of the head. Behind the principal figure are two additional strands of an echeloned wig, apparently unrelated to the completed portrait. Their presence provides compelling evidence for the fragment's interpretation as a practice piece, preserving separate exercises in the carving of one of the composition's most technically demanding details.

The face itself is characterised by the controlled idealisation associated with the finest Late Period relief sculpture. The long almond-shaped eye is narrow and rises towards its outer corner, emphasised by sharply defined contours. The nose is straight and elegantly proportioned, while the full lips project slightly from the face and lend the courtier an expression of composed refinement. The elongated, upward-tilting eye is particularly characteristic of sculpture associated with the Thirtieth Dynasty and provides an important stylistic indication for the dating of the fragment.

The period in which the relief was created witnessed one of the last significant artistic revivals of pharaonic Egypt. The Thirtieth Dynasty was founded by Nectanebo I in 380 B.C. and continued through the reigns of Teos and Nectanebo II, ending with the Achaemenid reconquest in 343 B.C. Despite continuing military pressure from Persia, these decades saw considerable activity in temple building and the production of sculpture of exceptional refinement. Nectanebo I and Nectanebo II in particular undertook building programmes at sacred sites throughout Egypt, consciously presenting themselves as legitimate successors to the great rulers of the pharaonic past.

Within this cultural environment, Egyptian artists frequently engaged with earlier sculptural traditions. The present fragment belongs to what is often described as a **neo-Memphite** tendency: a consciously retrospective artistic language drawing upon forms associated with earlier periods and, in particular, the prestigious sculptural traditions centred upon Memphis. Such archaism had already played an important role in the art of the preceding Saite period, but Late Dynastic artists continued to reinterpret older forms rather than reproducing them mechanically.

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The highly controlled features of this courtier, especially the idealised profile and rigorously ordered wig, therefore combine a deliberate engagement with earlier Egyptian visual conventions with the distinctive elegance of fourth-century B.C. workmanship. Sculptors' trial pieces provide unusually intimate evidence for the processes by which Egyptian artists were trained and monumental imagery was created. Such objects could serve as exercises in the representation of eyes, mouths, ears, wigs or hieroglyphic signs, allowing craftsmen to perfect individual elements of the canonical figure. The juxtaposition of the completed head with the isolated strands of hair on the present relief is particularly suggestive in this respect. Rather than simply presenting a finished image, the fragment preserves traces of artistic experimentation and therefore offers rare insight into the practical activity of an Egyptian sculptural workshop.

The physical character of the object reinforces this interpretation. The left and right edges are finished, while the upper and lower sections have broken away; the reverse has been smoothed. The fragment has been recomposed from several substantial pieces, with limited consolidation and retouching to areas of lifting, particularly beneath the eye. The collection number "Ae.12." is painted in black in the upper left corner and repeated on the reverse, recording part of its modern collecting history.

That history is associated with Prof. Dr. Roland Bay, a dentist in Basel who developed a keen scholarly interest in European prehistory. His collecting activities belonged to a broader intellectual engagement with archaeology and anthropology: in 1953, he was appointed head of the anthropological department at the Museum of Cultures in Basel. This provenance adds a further historical dimension to an object already remarkable for the immediacy with which it preserves the hand and working methods of an Egyptian sculptor during the final flourishing of independent pharaonic art.

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