

T O M A S S O



A Porphyry Vase, with Ovoid Gadrooned Body Flanked by Rams' Heads

Early 18th century

Porphyry

36 x 58 cm (14 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 22 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches)

Quarried exclusively at Mons Porphyrius in the Eastern Desert of Egypt, porphyry has been prized since antiquity for its remarkable hardness and lustrous purple colour, which bears a close resemblance to that of a particularly expensive pigment developed by the Phoenicians, known today as Tyrian dye. Several literary sources from antiquity speak of Alexander the Great's partiality to this colour, of his custom of wearing purple robes and of decorating his palaces with porphyry. The heirs to his throne in Egypt, the Ptolemies, are said to have continued this tradition, but it is only with the Roman Emperors Nero and Vespasian, towards the end of the first century A.D., that the association of porphyry with secular and religious power became established in Western civilisation.

Rome, the seat of the Empire, is where centuries later ancient porphyry statues, slabs, columns and vessels were excavated, as a result of the Renaissance period's renewed interest in classical art and architecture. The potent symbolism of porphyry, with its strong imperial connotation, thus assumed another level of meaning, as an emblem of Renaissance courts' erudition, fascination with antiquity and aspiration to parallel its splendour.

The palazzi of the Pope and his entourage were soon adorned with ancient porphyry artefacts, but the pursuit of this unique stone rapidly expanded beyond the confines of the Eternal City, and by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries porphyry was avidly collected by powerful figures such as the Medici Grand Dukes of Tuscany, the French cardinals Richelieu (1585-1642) and Mazarin (1602-1661), and the Sun King Louis XIV of France (1638-1715), who had a buying agent in Rome for his acquisitions. The interest in porphyry was such that it prompted artists to rediscover the art of carving it, a practice for which ancient Roman columns and other fragments were used, since Mons Porphyrius in Egypt had become inaccessible, a fact that further enhanced the rarity and value of works in this material.

The present vessel, executed in the early eighteenth century, is modelled on the shape of ancient Roman labra – shallow basins with a profiled upper lip, often supported by a fluted socle, that were frequently used as fountains –

such as can be admired today in the Museo di Villa Giulia (L56) and Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore (L61), both in Rome, or in the Pitti Palace in Florence (L58). The format is reduced to fit an interior decorative scheme, and the surface is textured with a gadrooned pattern, of the type that appears in other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century examples, including a pair of lidded vases (V65), a Knurled vase (V79) and a vase with serpents decoration (V70) today in the Louvre, another vase now in the Prado Museum (V88) and one in the Quirinal Palace in Rome (fig. 1; V115). The latter, dated to the eighteenth century, is also the closest in shape to the present vessel, with its body divided into a lower gadrooned section and polished upper one, and overhanging upper lip. The rams' heads that flank the present vessel are skilfully carved and find a close parallel in a porphyry vase dated to the late seventeenth century now in the National Renaissance Museum in Écouen (V97), that once formed part of the collection of Louis XIV of France.

Literature:

P. Malgouyres et al., *Porphyre: La pierre pourpre des Ptolémées aux Bonaparte*, Paris, 2003

D. del Bufalo, *Porphyry: Red Imperial Porphyry. Power and Religion*, Turin, 2012