

2.23 Openwork cylinder ring

Faience.

Third Intermediate Period,

Dynasty 21 – 22, c. 1070 – 712 BC.

H. 2.2 cm, W. 2.2 cm, Thickness 1.1 mm.

Openwork faience jewellery first appears in the second half of the 18th Dynasty. It was part of a style development that we also find with cosmetic objects and other small luxury articles in faience and glazed steatite. During the Third Intermediate Period, to which this blue glazed ring dates, there was a great flowering of the openwork technique.



This wide band ring is divided into five segments, each outlined by a narrow border. There are double lines on the upper and lower edges. Two of the sections contain a representation of the god Re-Harakhty, here depicted as a squatting falcon-headed god with a sun disc on his head, holding the feather of *ma'at*. The falcon god is squatting on a base shaped like the hieroglyph *nbw*, which means “gold”. Gold was a material associated with the gods in general and with the sun god Re in particular; it symbolizes divine life and the daily rebirth of the sun god in the morning. The two adjoining sections each contain a winged cobra on a simple throne with a block motif. The hands on the wings are holding a *ma'at* feather, and a *shen* ring, a symbol of the cosmos, is depicted between the wings. These two cobras usually represent Nekhbet and Wadjet, the protective goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt, but in view of the funerary symbolism of the object it is perhaps more likely that Isis and Nephthys are meant here. The fifth section is slightly smaller and contains a *djed* pillar. This symbol first appears in the Step Pyramid complex of Djoser, but what it represents this early is unclear, although it was soon associated with Sokar, the funerary god of Saqqara, and shortly afterwards with Ptah of Memphis. Since a gigantic *djed* was pulled upright by ropes in an important early ceremony, the likeliest suggestion is that it represents a stylised tree trunk with lopped-off branches. In the hieroglyphic script the *djed* sign is used to write the word “to endure”, “be stable”. It was a symbol of resurrection for the dead and came to be closely associated with the god Osiris; later texts sometimes speculate that it represents the god’s backbone. The identification with Osiris is confirmed here by the

atef crown sitting on top of the *djed*, a crown normally worn by this god.

These cylinder rings were perhaps formed by turning a malleable piece of faience around a stick. Rolling would then create a uniform thickness. During and after the drying process, the fine details could be added to the ring and it could be open-worked. The clearly iridized glaze layer has run, which is an indication that the application technique was used. However, what is unusual is that the ring also has smooth full glaze on its inside.

We can assume that similar openwork cylinder rings were produced in some quantity in antiquity. They are extremely fragile and only a few examples have survived, but surprisingly no fragments, presumably because the broken elements would be so small. This is in contrast to the enormous numbers of broken examples of faience rings which have been found at El Amarna. This cylinder ring is the only example of its kind with five segments. In view of the unmistakable funerary symbolism of its decoration it probably comes from the tomb of a member of the elite.

JvD

Parallels:

O.W. Muscarella, *Ancient Art: The Norbert Schimmel Collection* (Mainz 1974), no. 222; also in J. Settgast, *Von Troja bis Amarna: The Norbert Schimmel Collection New York* (Mainz 1978), no. 264; E. Riefstahl, *Ancient Egyptian Glass and Glazes in the Brooklyn Museum* (Brooklyn 1968), nos. 54 and 55; C.A.R. Andrews, *Ancient Egyptian Jewellery* (London 1990), fig. 45 a; F.D. Friedman (ed.), *Gifts of the Nile. Ancient Egyptian Faience* (London 1998), no. 108; also in S. Spurr, N. Reeves and S. Quirke, *Egyptian Art at Eton College. Selections from The Myers Museum* (New York 1999), no. 74.