

What a *balafré* is Made of

by MASSIMO VIDALE, GIANCARLO SIDOTI

The publication of objects from private collections, without verifiable information on the context of discovery and method of acquisition, often involves problematic aspects, in particular due to the possibility that they later turn out to be false or falsified finds. The dilemma, from this point of view, is whether to give up the potentially relevant residual informative value of the artefact or accept the risks in the interest of increasing international knowledge. In this sense, without losing sight of the ethical aspect—whereby the dissemination of an artefact risks increasing its commercial attractiveness, with further repercussions on the traffic of the works—it appears necessary to evaluate on a case-by-case basis the impact of the various factors involved. The position of East and West is not to encourage, in principle, the publication of finds of unknown provenance—also in light of the clear and indisputable commitment of the archaeologists of ISMEO (and already of IsMEO and IsIAO) in decoding, at a cost of significant efforts, scientific excavations of enormous complexity—but sometimes making exceptions justified by their artistic/scientific relevance.

In questo articolo descriviamo una statuetta inedita della serie dei *balafrés* (“scarred men,” o “Narbenmänner”) appartenente a una collezione privata. È stato possibile effettuare una prima serie di analisi totalmente non distruttive, mediante microscopia elettronica a scansione (SEM), spettroscopia di fluorescenza X (XRF) e di diffrattometria di raggi X (XRD), applicati, senza alcun prelievo, sulla superficie della statuetta. In tal modo disponiamo ora di una caratterizzazione, preliminare ma piuttosto completa, dei materiali costitutivi del manufatto. I risultati mostrano una selezione sorprendentemente specifica dei materiali costruttivi e, più in generale, una cura prima insospettabile nella manifattura di questi enigmatici manufatti protostorici.

Introduction

This paper describes an unpublished statuette belonging to the constantly growing census of the so-called *balafrés*, also known as “scarred men,” or in German “narbenmänner” (Vidale 2017: 168-200; Ghirshman 1963; Francfort 1992; 1994; Benoit 2013; Caubet 2019: 248; Schepers 2019). This artifact (Figs 1-6) belongs to a private collection, which allowed an easier movement and immediate analytical testing, avoiding the recurring, abundant bureaucratic access restrictions. It was thus possible to carry out a first series of totally non-destructive analyses using a Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM), a X-ray Fluorescence Spectrometer (XRF) and a X-Ray Diffractometer (XRD) used, without any sampling, directly on the solid surface of the statuette. In this way, we now have a preliminary but complete characterisation of the constituent materials of the artefact. As we shall see, results show a surprisingly specific selection of construction/assembling materials, and more generally a previously unsuspected care in the manufacture of these enigmatic and quite complex protohistoric artefacts—providing, in this way, a paramount example—if not almost a summary—of the sophisticated technological know-how which supported the arts and crafts of Middle Asia in