A Table Support with Dolphin from Iasos

by Stefan Feuser

During the excavations in Iasos in the “Complesso della basilica presso la porta est” in the 1960s a sculpture fragment carved out of a white marble of unknown provenance came to light (fig. 1). It has a height of approx. 0.60 m, the base has a diameter of 0.24 m and the breaking edge at the top has a diameter of 0.09 m. The sculpture consists of a conical basis with a flat bottom, a support in the back and the relief of a dolphin in the front. The upper part is missing, a fracture runs between the basis and the support (figs. 2-3).

The dolphin is carved in relief. Its lost tail fin was at the upper end and the snout is on the basis. Two fins are adjacent to the head; a third one is on the back of the dolphin. The dolphin has small eyes only visible from the side. In its mouth, it holds a smaller fish that is carved as a relief onto the basis. Two breathing holes are on the upper side of the dolphin’s snout. The basis, the support in the back and the relief in the front, hiding the structural support show that the piece is a table support of a one-legged table (monopodium). This kind of table support is known from Italy, Greece and Asia Minor. The dolphin is a common image on such objects from the eastern Mediterranean: ten other samples from Asia Minor and five from Greece are known until today. Design and arrangement are uniform, only proportion and quality of workmanship differ: In front of the support, the dolphin is depicted as a relief with tail fin at the upper end and the snout at the lower end. The mouth is open with either a fish or a cuttlefish inside. Besides one, all the pieces have a conical basis. The design of the dolphin and the base and the overall size of the piece from Iasos show most similarity with a table support found near Herakleia Pontike (Ereğli) on the Turkish coast of the Black Sea.
As is often the case for sculptures of small format and simple workmanship, it is difficult to establish a precise dating and a production area for the piece from Iasos. As the researches by Christopher F. Moss and Ursula Quatember showed for ornamental details of table supports from Italy (respectively table supports with lion’s protomes and feline’s paws), a dating on stylistic grounds is hardly possible for these small scale sculptures. However, as most of the table supports from Asia Minor can be dated to the 2nd c. AD, and since in the 3rd c. AD the supports changed to limited series of mythological topics (such as Bellerophon, Orpheus and the “Good Shepherd”), the table support from Iasos dates most probably to the 2nd c. AD. More precisely: considering that in the second half of the 2nd c. AD the bases of the table supports became larger and more lavishly decorated with mouldings, the piece from Iasos might be produced in the first half of the 2nd c. AD.

In Asia Minor the table supports were produced in three main workshops. One was located at the marble quarries of Docimium, where mainly the Asiatic garland and column sarcophagi were manufactured. This workshop produced table supports from the 1st c. to the first half of the 3rd c. AD and exported its products mainly to the Western part of Asia Minor and to Italy. The second workshop in Aphrodisias produced elaborate supports of high workmanship in the second half of the 2nd and the first half of the 3rd c. AD and exported them in a small area around the city and to Ephesus. The third workshop on Proconnesus manufactured from the second half of the 3rd c. to the end of the 4th c. AD and exported its products widely in the eastern Mediterranean. Thus, the table support with a dolphin from Iasos was either produced in Docimium or in a local production atelier.

Representations of dolphins were widespread in ancient times and were depicted in various contexts and genres. Generally, the dolphin on the table support can be understood as a visualization of the maritime world, its pleasantness and allures. Thus, it was an impersonal symbol of luck. The fish in the mouth of the dolphin symbolizes the abundance of the maritime sphere.

Written sources, pictorial representations and tables preserved in situ in Pompeii reveal that these supports, together with marble table tops, served in the house for the preparation of wine during the symposium and for the exhibition of precious vessels. They were placed at the end of visual axis and presented the wealth of the house owner and were used...
during the symposium. However, this does not mean that the complex where the table support from Iasos was found was necessarily a Roman private dwelling. Most of the supports from Asia Minor were found in secondary usage of the 4th to 7th c. AD. They were set up in Late Roman houses, in nymphaea and in baths, where they were no longer in use as table supports but as sort of antiquarian. Thus, the table support from Iasos originally stood in a private house of unknown location in the city in Roman imperial times and was reused in the dwellings of the “Complesso della basilica presso la porta est” in the 4th and 5th c. AD.

1 Inv. No. 2259. On the findspot see Levi 1968, pp. 539-544.
2 On supports of one-legged tables from Italy see Moss 1988, from Greece see Stephanidou-Tiveriou 1993 and from Asia Minor see Feuser 2013.
3 For Asia Minor see Feuser 2013, pp. 205-207, no. 20-29; for Greece see Stephanidou-Tiveriou 1993, pp. 290-291 no. 154-158.
4 A table support from Pergamon, now in the Agora depot (inv. No. S 764), has a lavishly decorated basis with mouldings, see Feuser 2013, p. 206, no. 23.
5 Akkaya 1994, p. 134, no. 57, fig. 57; Feuser 2013, p. 207, no. 29.
6 Moss 1988, pp. 142-147; Quatember 2006.
7 Feuser 2013, pp. 43-47.
8 Feuser 2013, pp. 166-170.
9 Feuser 2013, pp. 54-60; on the production of the column sarcophagi from Docimium see now Strocka 2017.
10 Feuser 2013, pp. 60-63.
11 Feuser 2013, pp. 64-73.
12 Andreae 1986, p. 52; Brandenburg 1983.
13 Stephanidou-Tiveriou 1993, pp. 58-73; Feuser 2013, pp. 27-29.
14 Feuser 2013, pp. 12-22.
15 On the Late Roman parts of the complex see Levi 1970, pp. 512-517.

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