

Centre oval table with a porphyry top, poplar veneered in mahogany and ebony, partly carved, gilded, and painted in black, with chiselled ormolu, supporting a slab of excavation Egyptian porphyry. Attributed to cabinetmakers active for the Bourbon court in Naples and to the Royal Pietre Dure Manufactory of Naples.  
Naples, early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Height: 28,74 in. (73 cm)

Width: 30,7 in. (78cm)

Depth: 18,89 in. (48 cm)

Provenance: De Spucches Family, Princes of Galati and Duke of Caccamo, Palermo

Studio essay by Dott. Enrico Colle, Stibbert Museum Director, Florence

The table consists of a slab of porphyry supported by a mahogany and ebony frame embellished with square frames of ebony and inlays in ormolu. This is supported by a fluted column terminating at top with a two tones gilt capital under a fluted and gilded cup. The column rests on a rectangular base, itself decorated with frames in ormolu, onto a moulded base supported by lion paws.

As the extraordinary thickness of the slab attests, the porphyry of the present table probably came from one of the archaeological sites around Naples, where excavations had begun in the first half of the eighteenth century and had continued uninterrupted well into the nineteenth. These were sponsored by both the Bourbons and the new sovereigns of Naples, Joachim and Caroline Murat.

This thick slab is of that kind of intensely-red porphyry, sprayed with small white dots, sometimes referred to as Gebel Dokhan porphyry, after the name of the Egyptian quarry from where it was extracted. In antiquity, the Gebel Dokhan quarries were exclusive property of the Emperor. In Rome and in the other cities of the Roman empire, such porphyry was therefore used exclusively to decorate mansions belonging to the Emperor and his immediate family.

It is reasonable to believe that the table was created with the explicit purpose of supporting such a rare archaeological find. The slab of porphyry was probably reworked by the Royal Pietre Dure Manufactory of Naples, which is recorded to have created a series of table tops in porphyry in the early nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The style of the wood element of the present table, on the other hand, presents important similarities with Neapolitan furniture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Neoclassical stylistic elements, such as the practice of decorating surfaces veneered in mahogany, purple wood, and ebony with frames in gilded metal (fig.1), are fused with structural elements typical of the Empire style, as can be seen especially in the column terminating at top in a fluted and gilded cup. The Parisian architect and designer working under Joachim Murat, Etienne Cérubin Lecomte, was

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<sup>1</sup> A. González-Palacios, 'Il Laboratorio delle Pietre dure dal 1737 al 1805', in N. Spinosa, *Le arti Figurative a Napoli nel Settecento*, Napoli, 1979, p. 87.

commissioned by the king to redecorate the rooms of his private apartment using in part furnishings coming from the household of the Naples Royal Palace and in part newly created pieces. These included 'two chests rich in mahogany with marble tops and decorations in gilt bronze' and the matching 'two night-stands' that were to decorate his bedroom.<sup>2</sup>

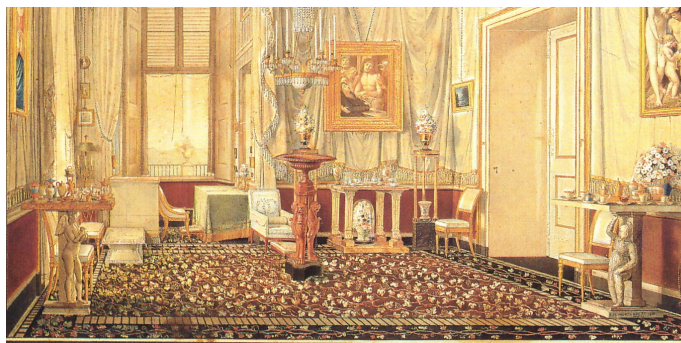
The piece was likely meant to be displayed at the centre of a room, as it was common practice with other furnishings of archaeological interest in the residences of the Murats. Queen Caroline was very fond of furniture combining with great originality archaeological finds and newly built elements. As can be witnessed in a watercolour by Elie-Honoré Montagny (fig. 2), she loved to decorate her rooms in the Naples and Portici Royal Palaces with antiquities transformed into functional modern pieces.



Oval Table with porphyry top



1. Neapolitan workshop, Writing desk, end of the 18<sup>th</sup> C., detail



2. E.-H. Montagny, *Caroline Murat's Room in the Royal Palace at Naples*, 1811, detail.

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<sup>2</sup> E. Colle, *Il mobile Impero in Italia. Arredi e decorazioni d'interni da 1800 al 1843*, Milano 1998, p. 28.