

# PHIALE - GOLD VESSEL



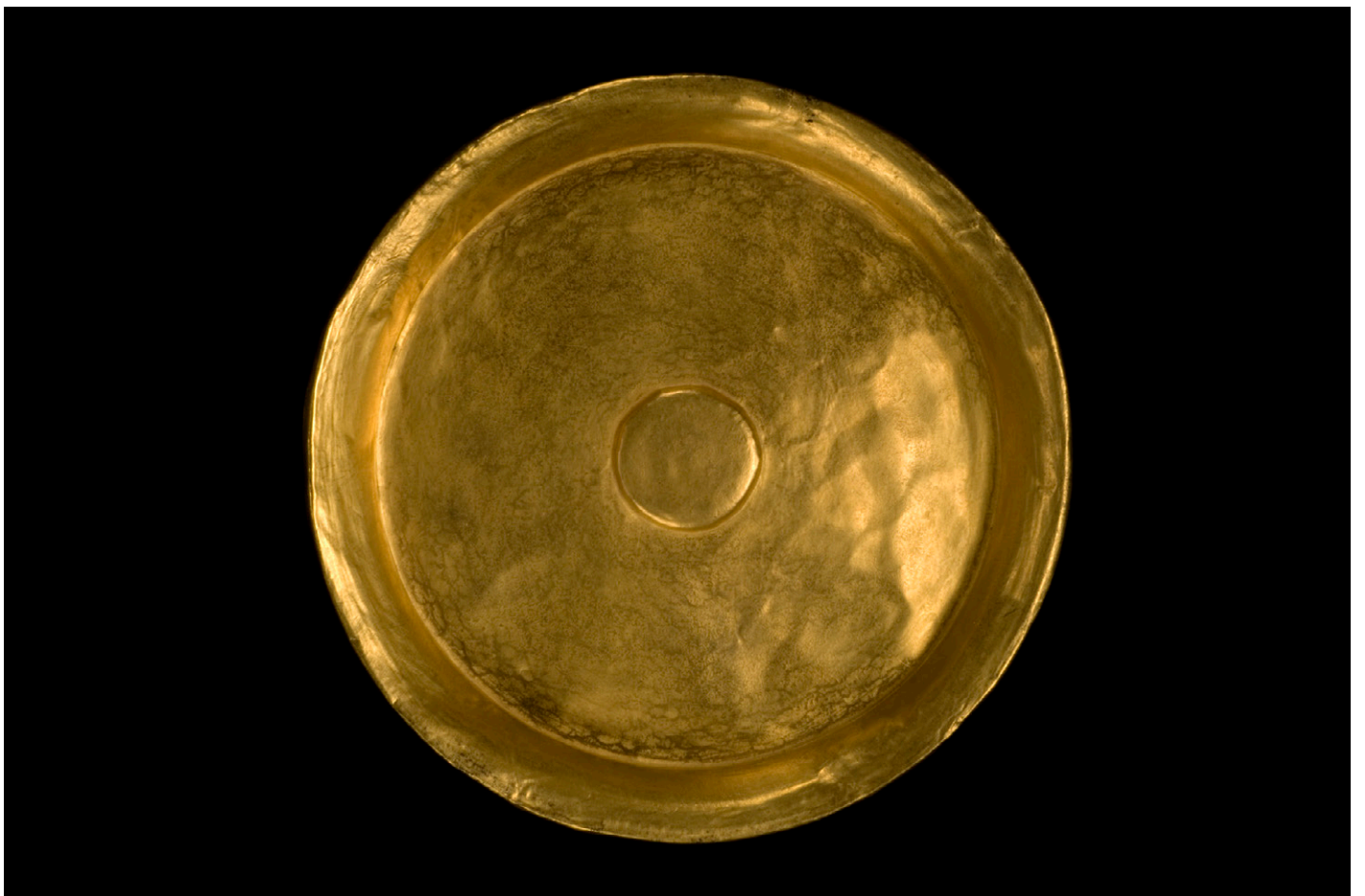
This phiale is the only gold vessel to have been recovered from Thonis-Heracleion. It is made from one sheet of gold, most probably hammered into shape and then finished with a lathe.

The shape is simple: from a flat bottom, the side rises vertically, and then opens out slightly at the top.

## Purpose of use

Phialai were used throughout the Hellenistic world for drinking or for libations. The water or the wine was poured from a jug into the phiale which was then turned to let the liquid infiltrate the soil.

This function is amply attested in both the ancient sources and in countless representations in Greek art where the vessel is shown in the hands of gods, men and women alike. Libation was the most frequent form of sacrifice in the ancient world.



## Part of the temple treasury

The phiale from Thonis-Heracleion was found trapped beneath construction blocks of the **temple of Amun-Gereb** and it is tempting to conclude that the object was used at this site, as a part of the rituals taking place there or as a dedication. On the same site four phialai made out of silver were also discovered.

The average Greek phiale is smaller than the gold example from Thonis-Heracleion, measuring on average between ten and thirteen centimetres in diameter. This enabled the vessel to be held comfortably in one hand.

Occasionally, there are examples made to greater specifications, possibly intended solely for display or dedication and not as functional items.

## Diplomatic gift

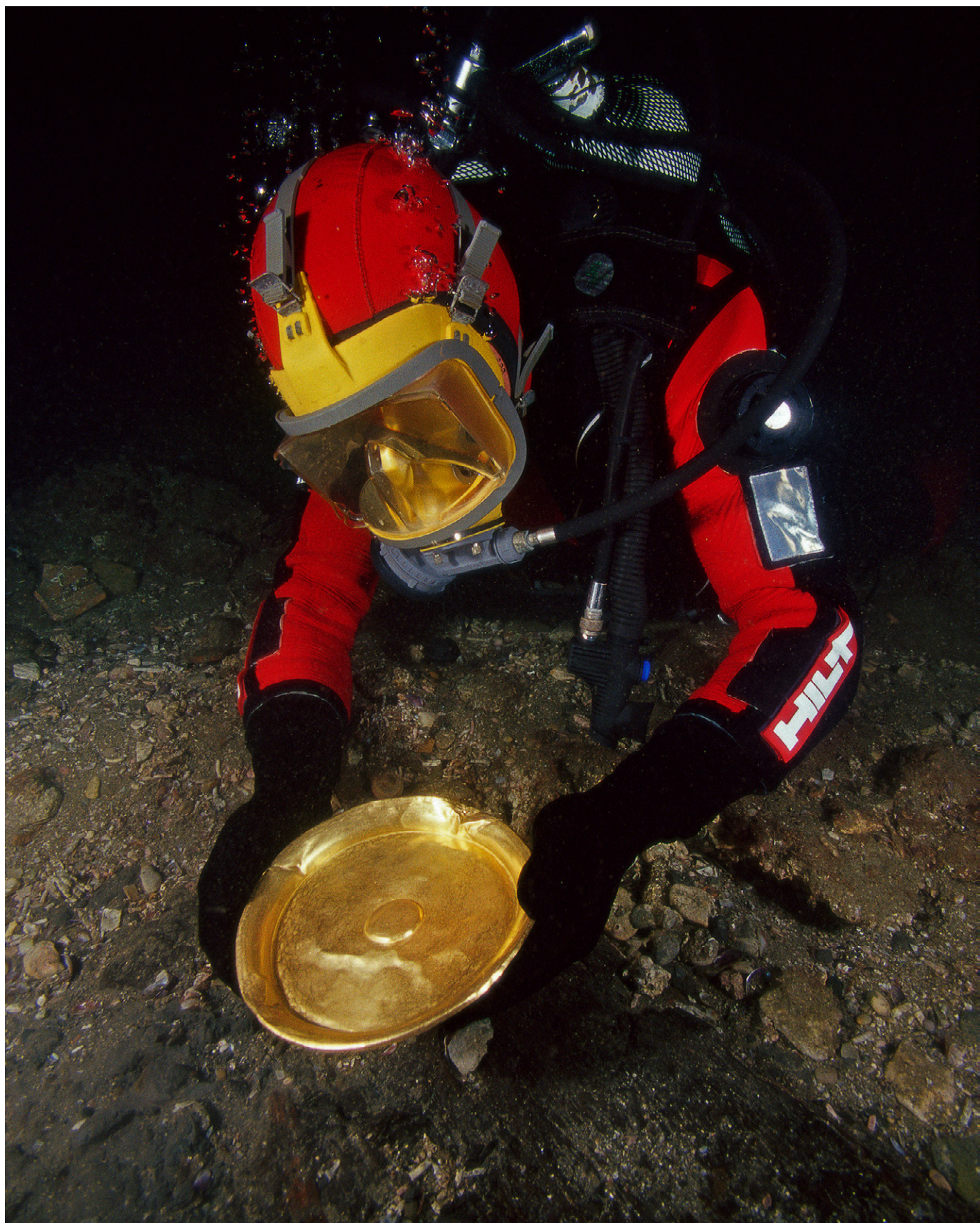
The literary record attests that phialai, especially in gold, were also used as diplomatic gifts. The vessel shape seems to have originated in post-Homeric times.

There are ample references to the term in ancient literature and the word often occurs in the temple inventories, suggesting the shape was a favourite gift for the gods.

Extant examples exist in a variety of materials, including onyx, terracotta, glass, bronze, tin, silver and gold from all over the ancient world.







**Objects:** Gold, Diam. 18.9 cm. Fourth century BC.

National Museum, Alexandria (SCA 296)

**Source:** Original description by Zoe Cox in exhibition catalogue  
Egypt's Sunken Treasures, Berlin 2006, exh. Egypt's Sunken Treasures,  
Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, May - September 2006

**Photos:** Christoph Gerigk © Franck Goddio/Hilti Foundation