

ART ANCIENT



## CYCLADIC OBSIDIAN CORES

3rd Millennium BC  
Knapped obsidian  
Largest 6.8 cm

## PROVENANCE

Collection of Jean-Henri Hoffmann (1823-1897), Paris, by 13 March 1877

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A remarkable group of early Bronze Age Obsidian cores and  
lamellae, from the island of Milos in the Cycladic Islands.





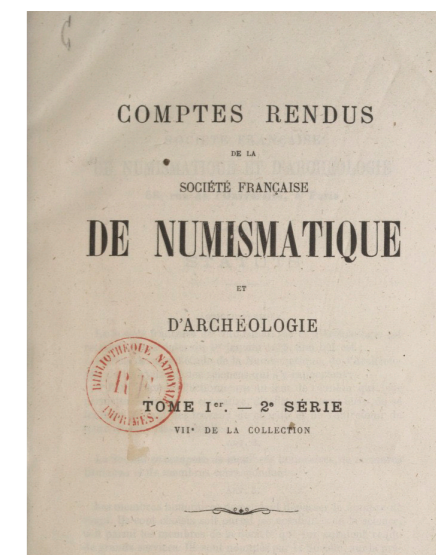
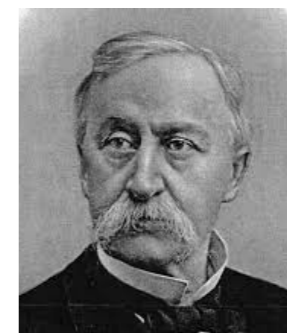
### Volcanic Glass

Obsidian is a silica-rich volcanic glass which forms when viscous lava cools very rapidly with minimal crystal growth. More abundant than flint and easier to work with than copper, obsidian was the preferred material for crafting cutting implements and weapons in the Aegean during the Bronze Age. The properties of obsidian made it particularly suitable to produce extremely sharp blades, with fine cutting edges which could hardly be matched when using any other material. A highly versatile type of glass, it was also particularly beautiful thanks to its pearly lustre and dark, opaque appearance and as such later used by the Romans for sculpture, vessels and jewellery.

The main source for obsidian in the Aegean was the island of Milos. With the exploitation of these outcrops beginning in the Upper Palaeolithic and reaching its peak in the Early Bronze Age, large quantities were exported across the Aegean Sea and throughout the Western Mediterranean. Transported overseas, obsidian would then be worked into fine cores and lamellae, such as the present examples.

As there was most likely open access to the outcrops on Milos, obsidian could be obtained during special voyages to the island or during fishing trips. The dark volcanic glass could also have circulated as part of parallel exchange networks across the Aegean, as evidenced by findings of other types of obsidian in the region. Regardless, the obsidian trade is the earliest trade network in the world for which we have concrete proof. It is particularly fascinating with regard to the history of human commerce and cultural development, as it suggests that other types of exchanges - such as other goods, ideas, technologies - took place as well.

**1** Roman obsidian decorative panel, c.1st century AD. The Metropolitan Museum, New York (17.194.2360).



The present obsidian cores and lamellae were accompanied by old labels, one of them reading:

'Lamellae and nuclei in obsidian from Greece  
Island of Milos?  
Notice by Mr Emile Rivière in the minutes of the  
French Society of Numismatics and Archaeology  
13 March 1877' (trans. from French)

Emile Rivière (1835-1922) was expert on prehistory, a doctor as well as a member of the French Society of Numismatics and Archaeology, for which he presided numerous meetings.

The present cores were shown to the Society at the meeting of 13 March 1877. It was noted in the minutes that 'Mr. Hoffmann presented a series of obsidian pieces originating from the island of Milo, such as blades, arrow heads, etc.' At a later meeting on 27 December 1878, it was further noted that 'the obsidian flaked by human hands during the prehistoric ages, presented by Mr Hoffmann during the prehistoric archaeology meeting on 13 March 1877, were part of a considerable collection of more than ten thousand pieces of the same nature. They belong to the age of polished stone, it is said that they were found on the island of Milo.'

Jean-Henri Hoffmann (1823-1897) was an antiquarian, numismatist and dealer. During his lifetime he curated a large collection and published several leading numismatic works, notably *Les Monnaies Royales de France* (1879). He also sold coins to European museums, including the British Museum and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

**2 (left)** Comptes-rendus de la Société Française de Numismatique et d'Archéologie, Vol. 1, 2nd Series (Paris, 1877),

**3 (left)** Numismatist, dealer and collector, Jean-Henri Hoffman, 1823-1897.



‘Among the various kinds of glass, we may also reckon Obsidian glass... which Obsius discovered in Æthiopia. This stone is of a very dark colour, and sometimes transparent ... Many persons use it for jewellery, and I myself have seen solid statues in this material of the late Emperor Augustus..’

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 36.67