

ART ANCIENT



## INSCRIBED GREEK GREAVE

With inscription, [...] Ε Ο // Η Ι Α Ρ Α // Ε [Μ] Ι  
6th-5th century BC  
Hammered, incised and punched bronze  
Height: 30 cm

## PROVENANCE

Collection of Axel Guttman (1944-2001), Berlin.

Hermann Historica, Auction 60, Antiquities including pieces from the Axel Guttman Collection, 13 October 2010, Lot 2169 (part)

An enigmatic ancient Greek bronze trophy of war. Once a greave worn by a hoplite in battle and later nailed to a wooden support and incised with a dedication to the gods, the partial inscription in Doric Greek reading, 'I am sacred to the god'. An icon of warfare and warrior culture from a pivotal era in Western civilisation.

A finely made greave for the left shin, with central crease marking the tibia, and incision marking the stylised inner edge of the calf muscle. Fragmented at the bottom, possibly in battle, with perforations around the edge for the attachment of the original lining. The greave itself has been intentionally bent from its anatomical shape, presumably so as to flatten it for conversion into a battle trophy, and to provide a canvas for the inscription on the proper left side. A large, square nail hole is located at the top where it was originally attached as a trophy.





'And on his legs were greaves of molten gold...'



Emerging from the Dark Age, the Greek world in the 7th and 6th centuries BC was defined by a period of expansion, discovery and innovation, underpinned by the renowned and revered military units of the city-states. The economic prosperity of the *polis* brought about the rise of the fully-armed Greek infantrymen - the hoplites - who funded their own armament. With a full panoply of armour costing between 75 and 100 *drachmas*, or the equivalent of 3-5 months pay for a skilled artisan or mercenary, his armour was his pride and joy, a marker of his economic status and the difference between life and death in the heat of battle.<sup>1</sup>

From the early 7th century BC, greaves formed an integral part of the hoplite's panoply. Developing from the earlier Mycenaean type, the greave was a metal shin-guard, running from the knee-cap to the instep, with perforations around the edge from which to attach a fabric lining, cushioning any blow sustained by the wearer. Throughout the 6th century, they developed into beautiful pieces of workmanship, and like the present example, were sculpted perfectly to reflect the anatomy of the wearer's leg. Beaten to a flexibility which allowed them to be sprung on, they were a sleek, streamlined and effective addition to the soldier's protection in battle.<sup>2</sup>

The present example, with beautifully sculptural form and muscular indentation, is a finely made greave which would have been worn on the hoplite's left shin. Elevated by the enigmatic inscription, denoting its use and dedication in antiquity, it is an icon of ancient Greek warfare and warrior culture.

<sup>1</sup> Amphora with Herakles fighting Geryon, and an arming scene of a warrior, c.540-530 BC. Harvard Art Museum, 1972.42.

<sup>2</sup> Virgil's *Aeneid*, 11.775.

### From the Battlefield

The dedication of armour at a sanctuary was a profound act of thanksgiving, marking the victors gratitude for divine protection in battle. Plucked from a fallen enemy soldier, the armour would have then been taken from the battlefield on the long pilgrimage to a temple or sanctuary, such as those at Olympia and Delphi, which became preeminent depositories of such dedications.<sup>3</sup> The present trophy is one of approximately 18 inscribed greaves known to exist and was likely dedicated by a soldier, or group of soldiers, on behalf of a city-state, perhaps to the god Zeus.<sup>4</sup> At the top, the square-shaped hole still survives, the metal around it splayed outward from the force of the hammer blow that drove it into a wooden post or rafter. There it would have remained on proud display, perhaps for decades, before being laid to rest.

Worn into battle, the present greave was likely present at some of the most renowned military campaigns of the age. The early decades of the 5th century BC in particular saw the battles of Marathon (490 BC), Thermopylae and Salamis (480 BC), conflicts which are widely recognised as having had profound consequences on the course of Western civilisation and its foundational ideals. During these conflicts, a hoplite had to rely on their well-made armour - as well as the protection of their gods - to ensure victory. With the inscription and dedication, the present greave is a particularly rare and enigmatic example of this crucial part of the hoplite's panoply.



## FOOTNOTES

- 1 M. Merryon (ed), *Mougins Museum of Classical Art*, (2011), 188.
- 2 A. Snodgrass, *Arms and Armour of the Greeks*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), 52-3.
- 3 R. Hixenbaugh, *Ancient Greek Helmets: A Complete Guide and Catalogue*, (New York: Hixenbaugh Ancient Art Ltd. 2019), 148.
- 4 Report by Dr. Leonie Defonteyne on the present greave, 6 May 2025.