

ART ANCIENT



HEAD OF A SATYR

Roman, circa 2nd - 3rd century AD
Carved and highly polished marble
With base: 26.7 cm
Without base: 15.3 cm

PROVENANCE

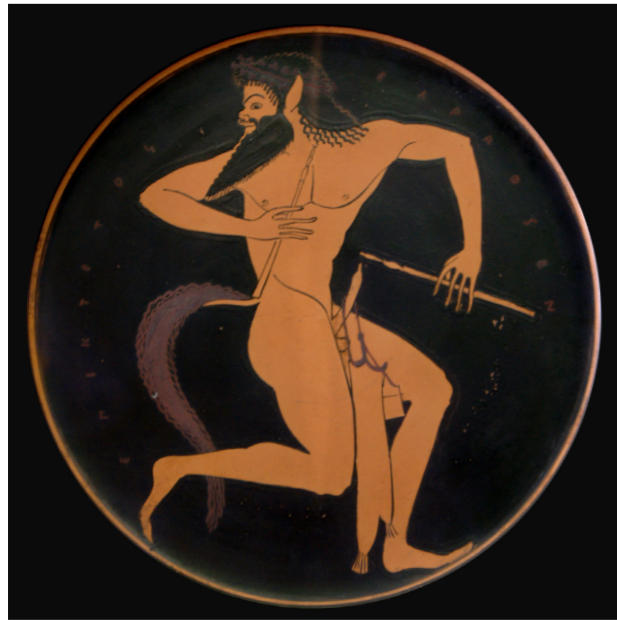
From the collection of Bo Ive, Denmark (1922 - 1981), thence by descent

Subsequently Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 914, 15 June 2023, Lot 806.

An extremely fine marble head of a satyr, depicted with ivy wreath, curly hair and pointed goat's ear, the full lips slightly parted to reveal the creature's clenched teeth.

The head was once part of a relief with visible fragmentation on the left side. Almost completely worked in the round and carefully polished, the skill of the sculptor is particularly remarkable given the confined working space available for a relief carving, such as this.





Imperial Rome (31 BC - 476 AD)

The Roman Imperial Period marked the expansion of the political and cultural influence of the Roman Empire. The period began with the reign of Augustus in 27 BC, immediately following Caesar's assassination which ultimately ended Rome's time as a republic. Soon after, Augustus' defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium (30 B.C.) led to the conquest of Egypt, and annexation of the country under Roman rule. Following his death, his successors continued pushing Rome's frontiers further, and in 96 AD, the Nerva-Antoine Dynasty greatly facilitated the Empire's development, as well as producing renowned leaders such as Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius. At the period's height in 117 AD, Rome controlled all the land from Western Europe to the Middle East, expanding the artistic influences from the varied cultures of the ancient world which Rome had enjoyed for centuries. By this point, Roman art had taken on attributes of the Greek, Egyptian and Etruscan Empires, with particular influence drawn from Greek mythology.

1 An Attic red-figure plate from Vulci, Etruria, dated, c.520-500 BC, showing an ithyphallic satyr.





The Roman Satyr

Satyrs were originally figures from Greek mythology who, guilty of hedonistic pursuits, excessive sexual desires and drunkenness, were followers of the god of wine, Dionysos (known to the Romans as Bacchus). The Romans, however, identified satyrs with their own nature spirits, fauns, who by contrast were typically seen as shy, woodland creatures. In both cultures, they had the upper body of men, but the horns, legs or tail of a goat. Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* classified them with sylvans and other countryside divinities to whom Zeus granted the right to live in peace in the woods and forests, far from the viciousness of men (1.192). Lucretius similarly noted that his contemporaries believed in 'goat-legged' (*capripedes*) satyrs, along with nymphs who lived in the mountains and fauns who played rustic music on stringed instruments and pipes (*De rerum natura*, 4.580). Indeed, in Roman era depictions, satyrs and fauns are both associated with music and revelry.¹

The present piece depicts the marble head of a satyr, and on account of its fracture and apparent distortion, it is likely a fragment from the relief of a decorative object or a sarcophagus. Exquisitely carved, the sculptor skilfully adapted the perspective to shape the present head in extremely high relief. On account of its size and finish, the object in question would certainly have been made for a particularly high-ranking individual.

¹ The Warwick Vase, c. 2nd century, marble. Acc. No. 42.20. On display at the Burrell Collection near Glasgow.



Reliefs bearing figures of this size can be seen on the Warwick Vase, a Roman marble sculpture discovered in fragments in the grounds of Emperor Hadrian's palatial villa near Tivoli, in 1771 (Fig. 1).² The Bacchic imagery on the Warwick Vase, and indeed the other sculptures found in the villa's gardens, evoked the pleasures of life enjoyed through wine and feasting - a fitting decorative agenda for the Emperor's private palace, and retreat from day-to-day life in Rome.

The present fragment might equally have come from a Roman sarcophagi (for example, see figs. 2 & 3), which were becoming increasingly popular throughout the late imperial period and into the second century AD. Narrative scenes from Greek mythology were a popular choice for decoration, reflecting the upper-class Roman taste for Greek culture and literature.³ The cult of Dionysus, in which satyrs would have formed a central role, seemed to have been a popular theme, reflecting the compositions and style of classical Greek art. In particular, Dionysiac scenes evoked celebration, offered hope for a pleasurable afterlife, as well as reflected the idea of death as a release from the cares of the world.⁴

² Marble sarcophagus with the Triumph of Dionysos and the Seasons, Roman, ca. 260-270 AD. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Acc. No. 55.11.5.



3 Sarcophagus panel depicting a drunken Satyr carried by a Faun, and two genii. Roman, 2nd Century AD. Marble. The British Museum, No. 1805,0703.126

Footnotes

1 L. Roman, M. Roman, 'Satyrs', *Encyclopedia of Greek and Roman Mythology*, (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), p. 432.

2 Glasgow Museums, *The Warwick Vase*, c. 2nd century, marble. Acc. No. 42.20. URL: <https://collections.glasgowmuseums.com/mwebcgi/mweb?request=record;id=40016;type=101>

3 H. Awan, 'Roman Sarcophagi', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, April 2007. URL: https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rsar/hd_rsar.htm

4 H. Awan, 'Roman Sarcophagi'.