

PORTRAIT OF SOPHOCLES

(C. 497-406 BC)

ROMAN, 2ND CENTURY AD
MARBLE
RESTORED IN THE 17TH OR 18TH CENTURY

HEIGHT: 51 CM.

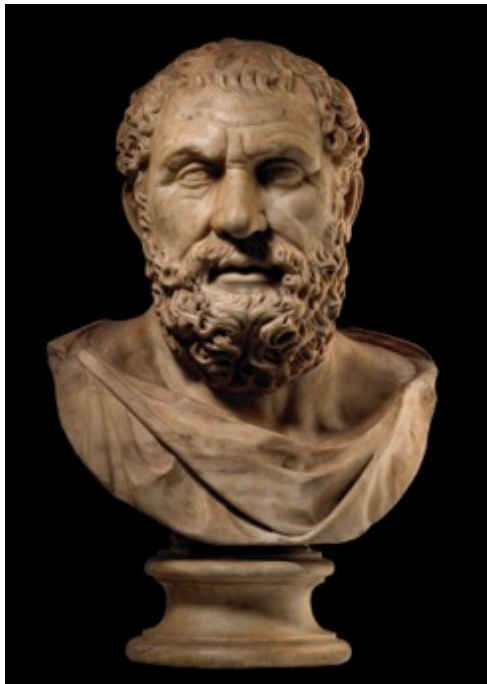
WIDTH: 33 CM.

DEPTH: 24 CM.

PROVENANCE:

*FORMER COLLECTION OF THE
REV. WALTER STEVENSON HALLIDAY
(1793-1872), GLENTHORNE HOUSE,
NORTH DEVON, ENGLAND, PROBABLY
ACQUIRED DURING A SOJOURN TO ITALY
IN 1814-17 OR 1831.*

*THENCE BY CONTINUOUS DESCENT
WITHIN THE HALLIDAY FAMILY.
FORMER COLLECTION OF SIR
CHRISTOPHER ONDAATJE,
GLENTHORNE HOUSE, NORTH DEVON,
ENGLAND, ACQUIRED FROM THE
PREVIOUS OWNERS WITH THE HOUSE
AND ITS CONTENTS IN 1984.*

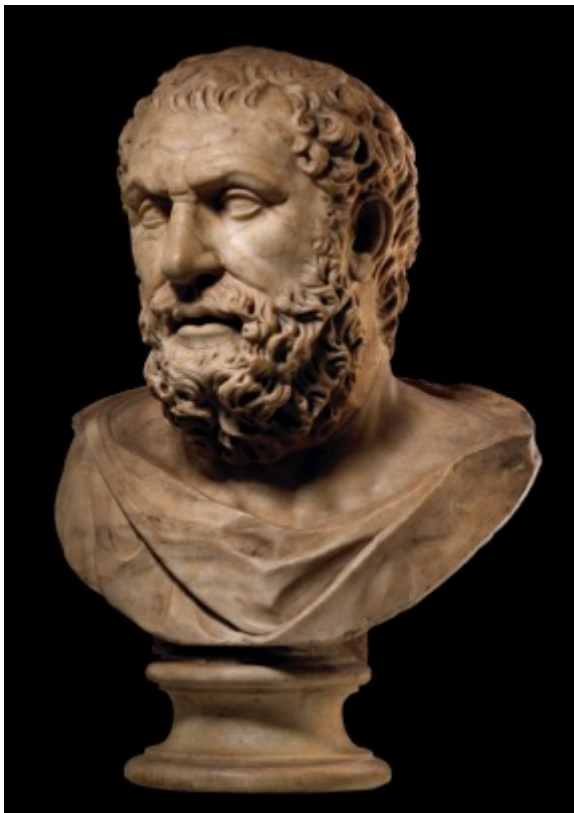


This magnificent bust represents a middle aged man with a meditative gaze and deep wrinkles marking his forehead, the contours of his eyes and his nasolabial folds. His face is full and rectangular. He has a full beard with symmetrical curls, which frames his fine, slightly parted lips. His hair is short and also made up of very detailed curly locks, shaped with a chisel. These end in small strands combed over his forehead. His eyes are hooded under his knitted brows and framed by his eyelids, which are very lifelike. His pupils are not marked. This portrait radiates an aura of authority and wisdom, as well as great humanity. The artist who sculpted this face was able to render its features and the signs of age very realistically, but also convey an expression and feelings, making it a masterpiece of portraiture.

The Greek playwright Sophocles (ca. 497 406 BC), master of tragic theatre, can be recognised in this face. Out of the roughly 123 plays he composed, eight made their way to us, including Oedipus the King, Antigone and Electra. He contributed to revitalising the genre of tragedy in Athens in the 5th century BC, delving into the psyches of his characters, who were confronted with moral

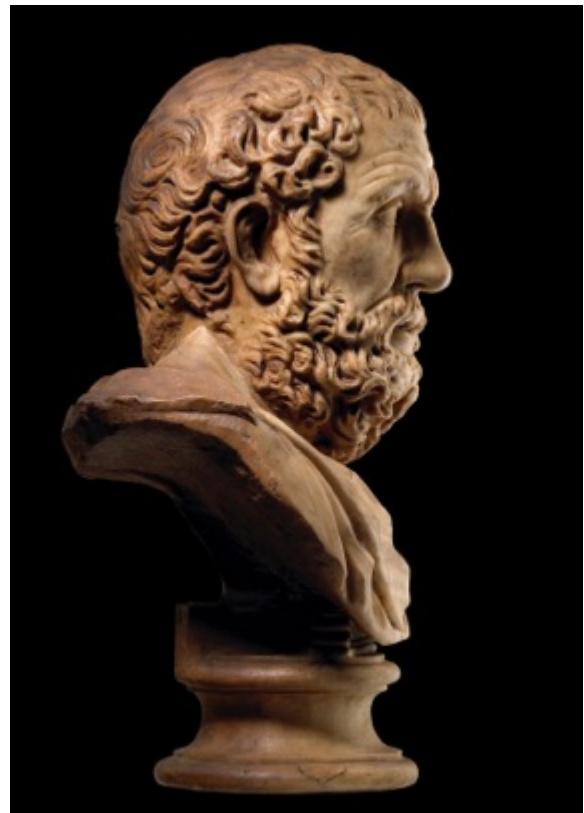


problems. An honorary bronze sculpture of him was erected in the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens in about 330 BC, where Sophocles was represented full length next to Aeschylus and Euripides, the two other great, classical tragedians. The marble Roman copy from the Augustan period conserved at the Vatican Museums gives us a good idea of what the bronze sculpture looked like, as it has now disappeared (Ill. 1). We see the same full, rectangular face, wrinkled forehead, detailed beard with symmetrical curls and hair with strands combed over the forehead as in our bust, making it possible to identify Sophocles.



While Greek portraits were always full length, reflecting the moral and physical qualities of great men in their whole bodies and their gestures, from the end of the Hellenistic period, the Romans popularised bust and herm portraits, focusing more on

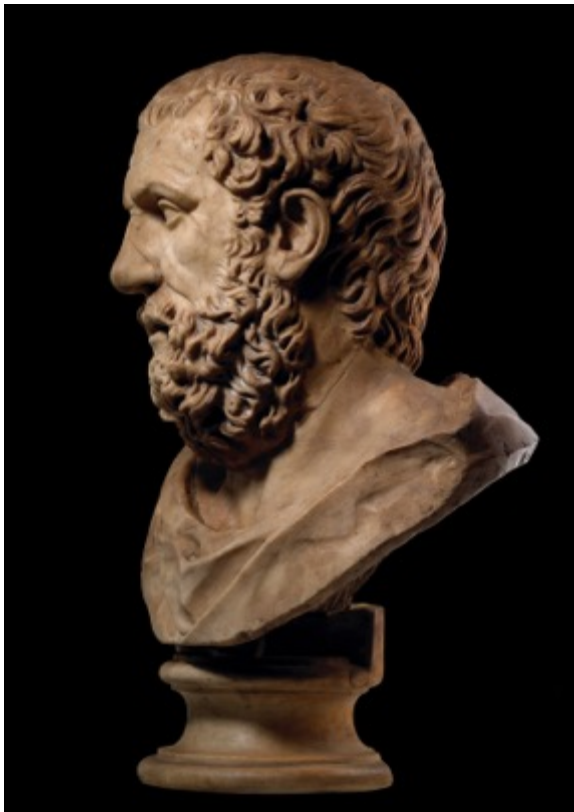
facial features. Representations of great Greek philosophers and writers spread through the Roman Empire during Hadrian's reign (AD 117-138). He was the first emperor to fully adopt Greek culture and aesthetics. Exhibited in the most sumptuous villas, these portraits played a role of representation, informing visitors of the social and intellectual level of the owners, as well as their penchant for Greek culture. In the same way, the Roman elite liked to have themselves portrayed in the likeness of philosophers and, from that period, wearing a beard became the sign of one's interest in Hellenistic culture.



Stylistically, our remarkably sculpted bust can be dated to the 2nd century AD, when Greek inspired portraits were completely assimilated by Roman sculptors and their sculptural qualities were at their height. The curls of hair, with their full, complex texture,

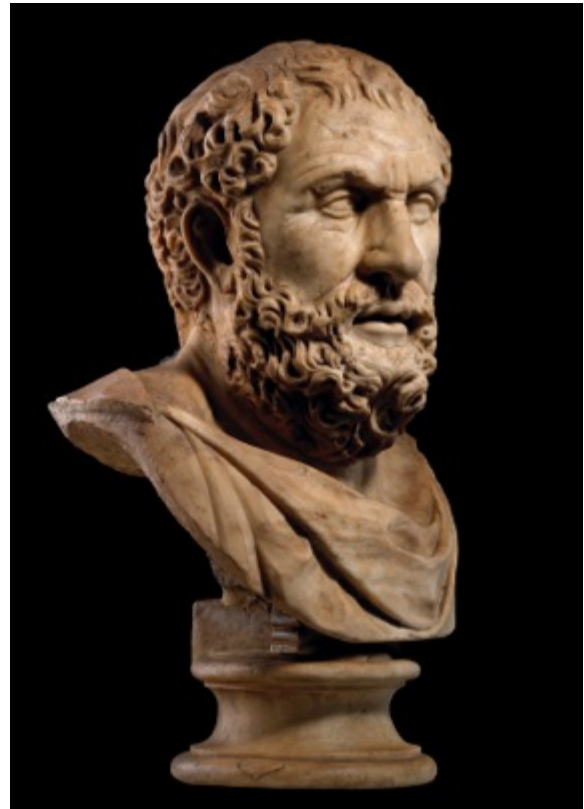


are typical of the portraits created during Hadrian's reign (AD 117-138) and the Severan dynasty (AD 193-235), as are the realistic wrinkles. Other similar examples are the Portrait of a Bearded Poet conserved at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (Ill. 2), the Louvre's Portrait of the Stoic Philosopher Chrysippus (Ill. 3) and the Vatican Museums' Portrait of the Hellenistic Philosopher Epicurus (Ill. 4), all dating back to the 2nd century AD. All these sculptures exhibit the same sense of detail and realism, curly beards, thick hair, parted lips and marked pupils as ours.



Our bust was among the collections of Glenthorne House, a dwelling built by the reverend Walter Stevenson Halliday (1793-1872) at the beginning of the 19th century. The son of a rich Scottish naval surgeon, the reverend Halliday inherited the family fortune upon the death of his older brother

and undertook the construction of Glenthorne House. The main dwelling was completed in 1831, then extended in 1839 and 1846. Overlooking the splendid coast of North Devon and surrounded by a forest, Glenthorne House embodied Reverend Halliday's affinity for the romantic aesthetic, its architecture blending neoclassicism with the steeply pitched roof and mullioned windows of the neo-Gothic (Ill. 5). The reverend Halliday was a man of letters, having studied at Oxford and Eton, where he socialised with the romantic poet Percy Shelley. He was also a keen traveller, undertaking a Grand Tour of Italy from 1814 to 1815 and returning years later in 1831. It was very likely during one of these journeys that he acquired this bust, which, as a literary enthusiast, would certainly have called out to him.

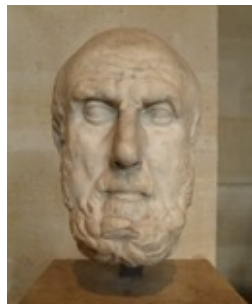


The reverend Halliday died without children in 1872 and his nephew, William, inherited the property in 1882. The last member of the Halliday family to possess the estate was Benjamin Halliday, who inherited it in 1968. The house and all its contents were sold to Sir Christopher Ondaatje (born in 1933) in 1984. With the help of his wife, he renovated it entirely and conserved a large part of its collections, including this splendid bust of Sophocles, which found a place in the library (Ill. 6).

Comparatives:

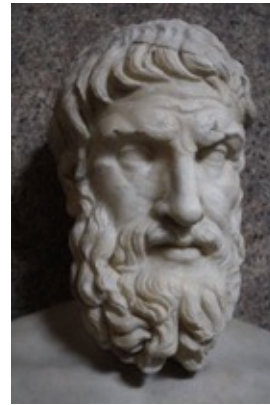


Ill. 1. Sophocles, Roman copy after a Greek original ca. 330 B.C., marble, Musei Vaticani, Vatican, Rome.



Ill. 2. Portrait of a Bearded Poet, Philosopher or Sage, Roman, circa 120-140 A.D., marble. Metropolitan Museum, New York, inv. no. 1993.342.

Ill. 3. Portrait of the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus, Roman, 2nd century A.D., marble. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. Ma 326.1.



Ill. 4. Portrait of the Hellenistic Philosopher Epicurus, Roman, 2nd century A.D., marble. Musei Vaticani, Vatican, Rome, inv. no. MV.301.0.0.

Provenance :



Ill. 5. Glenthorne House.

Ill. 6. The present bust in the library at Glenthorne House (top left in the photo).

