

ACROTERION REPRESENTING A BEARDED MAN

ROMAN, 1ST HALF OF THE 3RD CENTURY AD
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 24.5 CM

WIDTH: 26 CM

DEPTH: 6 CM.

PROVENANCE:

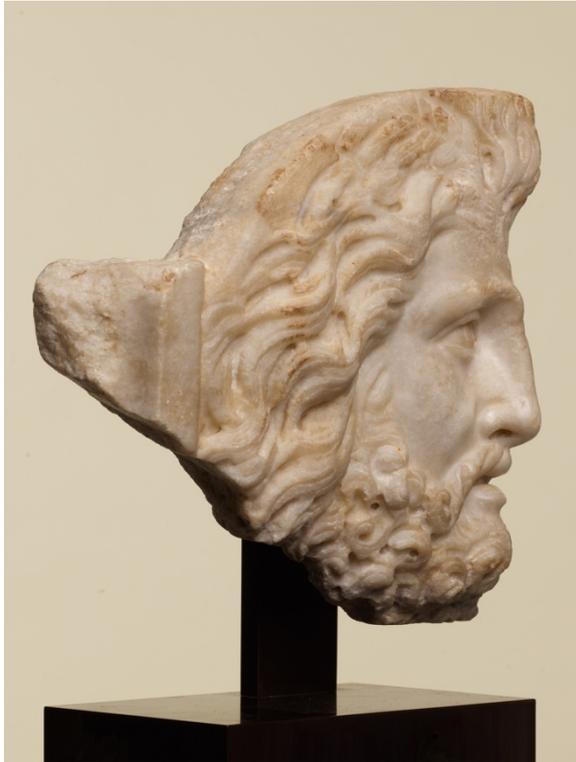
*IN THE PRIVATE COLLECTION OF
GUSTAVE CLÉMENT-SIMON (1833-1909),
IN HIS RESIDENCE OF CHÂTEAU DE
BACH, NAVES (CORRÈZE).
THEN, PASSED DOWN TO HIS SON,
FRÉDÉRIC CLÉMENT-SIMON,
AMBASSADOR, AUTHOR AND HEIR OF
THE CHÂTEAU DE BACH.
IN THE FRENCH PRIVATE COLLECTION
OF GEORGES COUTURON, WHO BOUGHT
THE CHÂTEAU ALONG WITH ALL ITS
COLLECTIONS IN 1938.
THEN, PASSED DOWN AS AN HEIRLOOM
UNTIL 2025.*



Our work is a sculpted marble fragment, meticulously wrought in high relief. It is trapezoidal in shape, its front face sculpted while the back was left empty and even. It is an acroterion representing a bearded man with an exaggerated expression. His face, displayed in a three-quarter view, is crowned with thick hair, animated by deeply incised locks that seem to blow to the left as though buffeted by the wind. To the left of his hair, a smooth, vertical strip and a sharp bend mark a parting line, typical of sarcophagus corners. Over his forehead, a few reed stalks are discreetly intermingled with the man's hair. His face, both solemn and serene, is sculpted with remarkable precision. A wrinkle etched above the bridge of his nose underlines the age of our man and forms a slightly drooping brow. His thin, delicate eyelids and almond-shaped eyes follow the movement of his eyebrows. In the inner corners of his eyes, the marble was hollowed with a chisel to make his gaze seem more lifelike. His irises are represented by fine incisions, while his pupils are carved. Our man's gaze is cast towards the sky in a dramatic attitude. His full cheeks and high cheekbones contrast with the circles beneath his eyes. His nose is straight, with round, hollowed-out nostrils, accentuated by slight circular incisions.



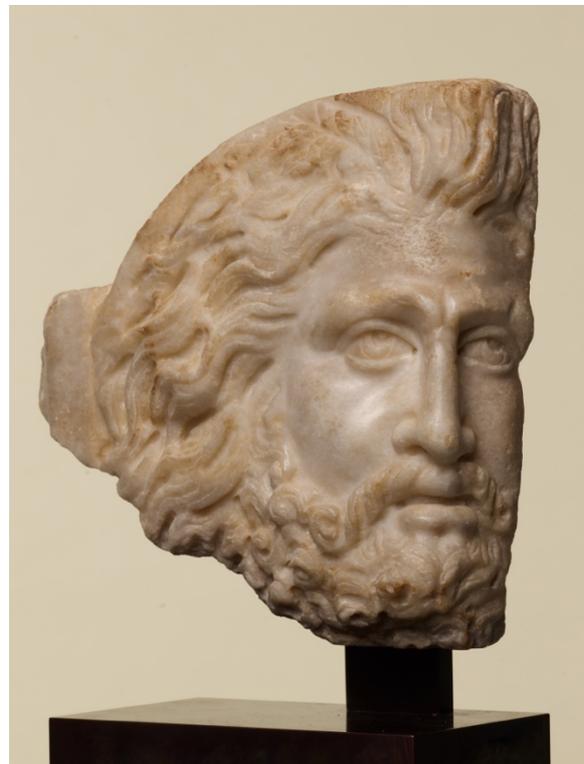
Under his nose, a tidy moustache and chiselled beard prolong his hair. His beard, especially, is showcased through regular, wave-shaped motifs, while his moustache elegantly frames his upper lip. His lips are slightly parted and his mouth hollowed out.



Our fragment is sculpted from particularly elegant grey-white marble that catches the light and has a perfectly polished surface. There are chips and traces of wear in some places, linked to its architectural function. On the left side of the forehead of our man, there are some traces of erosion, as well as a slight brown patina, which confirm its authenticity.

This fragment is from the right corner of a sarcophagus lid. In Roman funerary sculpture, it was common to adorn corners with majestic heads, the symbolic guardians of the monument. The effigies could represent cosmic deities such as Helios,

Selene and Dionysus, local personifications of the forces of nature such as river gods, or grimacing faces such as our fragment, which served an apotropaic function. From the reign of Trajan (in the beginning of the 2nd century AD), inhumation progressively replaced cremation, which led to the expansion of relief sarcophagi. Rome then became a major production centre, attracting Greek sculptors and specialist workshops that disseminated their models throughout the Empire.



In the 3rd century, demand intensified both among the urban elites and in the provinces and decoration also became more dramatic and animated, reflecting a growing taste for expressive figures. The iconography of our head is in line with that tradition. The reeds intermingled with his hair, a lifelike detail, would seem to indicate that our figure is a river deity. In Greek mythology, river gods or *Potamoi* were minor deities, the

personifications of waterways. They were the sons of the Titans Oceanus and Tethys and the brothers of the Oceanids. The representations, placed at the corners of lids, symbolised the eternal cycle of life and death and accompanied the deceased person on their way to the underworld.



Many institutions across the globe house sarcophagi from the 3rd century AD. With such examples as models, we can picture what the complete sarcophagus our fragment belonged to would have looked like. The British Museum's collection thus includes a remarkable example (ill. 1). The Louvre also owns two sculpted sarcophagi of very high quality, one adorned with the faces of Helios and Selene (ill. 2) and the other with two heads of Dionysus (ill. 3). In the J. Paul Getty Museum, the lid of a Roman sarcophagus dating from AD 225 still illustrates that form of decoration (ill. 4).

Finally, a fragment very similar to our piece is preserved within the Vatican Museums (ill. 5).

Our work is from the private collection of Gustave Clément-Simon (1833–1909), (ill. 6), a magistrate and savant, who had it installed in his estate, Château de Bach, in Naves (ill. 7). It then passed to his son, Frédéric Clément-Simon (ill. 8), an ambassador and author, before joining the collection of Georges Couturon (ill. 9), the new owner of the château and buyer of all its collections, in 1938. It remained within his line until 2025. That prestigious provenance illustrates the history of French art collecting in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Comparative works:



Ill. 1. Sarcophagus, Roman, AD 200–220, marble, H.: 62 cm; H. of lid: 11 cm. British Museum, London, inv. no. 1805.0703.144.



Ill. 2. Sarcophagus, Roman, 2nd quarter of the 3rd century AD, marble, H.: 95 cm, H. of lid: 32 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. N 555.



Ill. 3. Sarcophagus, Roman, 2nd quarter of the 3rd century AD, marble, H.: 97 cm, H. of lid: 29 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. N 540.



Ill. 4. Sarcophagus lid, Roman, AD 225, marble, H.: 21,5 cm. J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. no. 73.AA.99.



Ill. 5. Corner fragment of a sarcophagus lid, Roman, 3rd century AD, marble, H.: 57,5 cm. Museo Gregoriano Profano, Vatican, inv. no. 4926.

Provenance:



Ill. 6. Portrait of Gustave Clément-Simon (1833–1909) by Alexandre Bertin.



Ill. 7. Château de Bach, Naves, Corrèze.



Ill. 8. Portrait of Frédéric Clément-Simon (1873–1934).



Ill. 9. Portrait of Georges Couturon (1886–1945).