

ACROTERION DEPICTING A BEARDED MAN

ROMAN, FIRST HALF OF THE 3RD CENTURY AD
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 24.5 CM.

WIDTH: 20 CM.

DEPTH: 6 CM.

PROVENANCE:

*FORMER PRIVATE COLLECTION OF
GUSTAVE CLÉMENT-SIMON (1833-1909),
IN HIS RESIDENCE AT CHÂTEAU DE
BACH, NAVES (CORRÈZE).*

*THEN BY DESCENT TO HIS SON
FRÉDÉRIC CLÉMENT-SIMON,
AMBASSADOR, WRITER AND HEIR OF THE
CHÂTEAU DE BACH.*

*FORMER PRIVATE COLLECTION OF
GEORGES COUTURON, WHO PURCHASED
THE CASTLE WITH ALL ITS COLLECTIONS
IN 1938.*

THEN BY DESCENT UNTIL 2025.



Our work takes the form of a fragment carved in marble and carefully crafted in high relief. Trapezoidal in shape, the front is sculpted while the back is left empty and flat. It is an acroterion representing a bearded man with an exaggerated expression. The face, turned three-quarters of the way round, is surrounded by abundant hair, animated by deeply incised strands that seem to fly off to the left, as if pushed by the wind. On the left side of this hair, a smooth vertical strip and a clear break mark the joint line, typical of corner joints on sarcophagi. At the top of the forehead, a few strands of reeds are discreetly integrated into the mass of hair. The man's face, both serious and serene, is sculpted with remarkable precision. A marked fold of flesh above the bridge of the nose emphasises the mature age of our man while forming a slightly drooping eyebrow. The thin, delicate eyelids follow the movement of the eyebrow, as do his almond-shaped eyes. In the inner corner of the eye, the material has been hollowed out with a trephine for a more realistic representation of the gaze. The iris is represented by a fine incision, while the pupil is hollowed out. Our man's gaze turns dramatically towards the sky. His full cheeks and high cheekbones accentuate the hollows under his eyes. His nose is straight with rounded nostrils – highlighted by a slight circular incision – and hollowed out. Below the nose, a neat moustache and beard



sculpted with a trephine extend the hairline. His beard is particularly highlighted by regular wave-shaped patterns, while the moustache elegantly follows the line of our man's upper lip. The mouth is slightly open and hollowed out.



Our fragment is carved from particularly elegant greyish-white marble that captures the light with its perfectly polished surface. It retains chips and signs of wear in places, reflecting its architectural function. On the left side of its forehead, traces of erosion and a slight brown patina confirm its authenticity. This fragment comes from the right-hand corner of a sarcophagus lid. In Roman funerary sculpture, it was common to adorn these corners with majestic male heads, symbolic guardians of the monument. These effigies could represent cosmic deities—Helios, Selene, Dionysus—local

personifications linked to the forces of nature, such as river gods, or grimacing faces, as on our fragment, which then had an apotropaic function. From the reign of Trajan (early 2nd century AD) onwards, burial gradually replaced cremation, leading to the rise of relief sarcophagi. Rome became the major centre of production, attracting Greek sculptors and specialised workshops who spread their models throughout the Empire.



In the 3rd century, demand intensified among both the urban elite and in the provinces, and decorations became more dramatic and lively, reflecting a growing taste for expressive figures. The iconography of our head is part of this tradition. The reeds embedded in the hair, a naturalistic detail, suggest that it is a river deity. In Greek mythology, the river gods or Potamoi are

minor deities personifying waterways. They are the sons of the Titans Oceanus and Tethys and the brothers of the Oceanids. These representations, placed at the corners of the lids, symbolised the eternal cycle of life and death and accompanied the deceased on their journey to the afterlife.



Many international institutions have sarcophagi from the 3rd century AD, which give us an idea of what the monument to which our fragment belonged might have looked like in its entirety. The British Museum collection, for example, has a remarkable example (ill. 1). The Louvre Museum also has two finely carved sarcophagi: one decorated with the faces of Helios and Selene (ill. 2), the other with two heads of Dionysus (ill. 3). At the J. Paul Getty Museum, a Roman sarcophagus lid dating from 225 CE further illustrates this type of

decoration (ill. 4). Finally, a fragment very similar to our piece is kept at the Vatican Museum (ill. 5).

Our work comes from the former private collection of Gustave Clément-Simon (1833-1909) (ill. 6), a magistrate and scholar, who had it installed in his estate at the Château de Bach in Navès (ill. 7). It then passed to his son Frédéric Clément-Simon (ill. 8), an ambassador and writer, before becoming part of the collection of Georges Couturon (ill. 9) in 1938, the new owner of the château who acquired all of the collections. It has remained in this family line ever since, until 2025. This prestigious provenance illustrates the history of French collecting in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Comparatives:



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



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



Ill. 3. Sarcophagus, Roman, 2nd quartier of the 3rd century AD, marble ; H. : 97 cm, lid: H. : 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. 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 de Gustave Clément-Simon (1833-1909), réalisé par Alexandre Bertin



Ill. 7. Château de Bach, Naves, Corrèze



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



Ill. 9. Portrait de Georges Couturon (1886-1945)