

HERM OF HERCULES

ROMAN, CIRCA 1ST CENTURY AD

MARBLE

H.: 30 CM. - W.: 15 CM. - D.: 7.5 CM.

RESTORATIONS FROM THE 18TH CENTURY

HEIGHT: 30 CM.

WIDTH: 15 CM.

DEPTH: 7.5 CM.

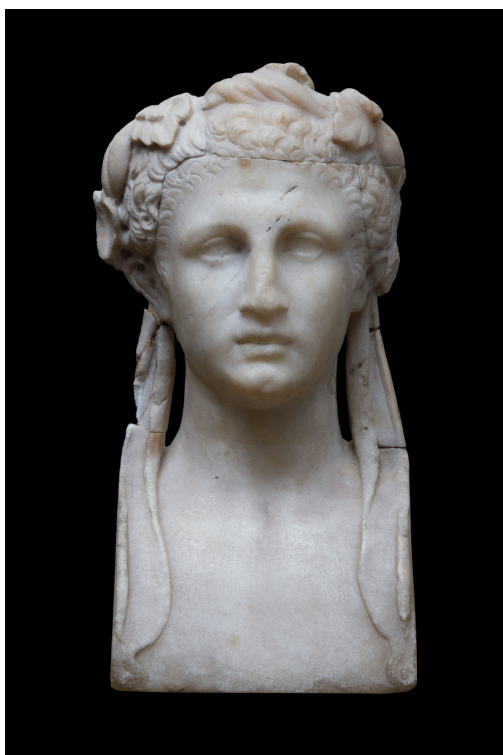
PROVENANCE:

*FORMER EUROPEAN COLLECTION FROM
THE 18TH CENTURY, BASED ON THE
RESTORATION TECHNIQUES.*

*FORMER ENGLISH PRIVATE
COLLECTION, BULLWOOD HALL,
HOCKLEY, ESSEX, BETWEEN*

1930 AND 1950.

*THEN BY DESCENT IN THE SAME FAMILY
UNTIL 2023.*



Our sculpture takes the form of a herm pillar depicting Hercules in a youthful and idealized representation. The head of the figure is encircled by a ribbon, identifiable as a *taenia*, delicately adorned with finely carved vine leaves. This band wraps around the hair and stands out in slight relief against

the mass of hair. On either side of the face, it extends into two long ribbons that fall behind the ears and then glide down along the neck. Treated as almost autonomous and relatively rigid elements, they unfold across the upper torso in gentle curls. This arrangement accentuates the verticality of the composition, in perfect harmony with the slender form of the herm.

The hair is composed of short, curly locks, rendered with regularity. The curls, shallow in depth, are carved strand by strand with fine incisions, giving the whole a great softness and a sense of harmony. The vine leaves, sculpted in relief, introduce a pronounced decorative effect and enliven the surface of the head. The face conforms to the classical canon of idealization: the forehead is broad, and the brow ridges are only lightly marked, softening the modeling. The almond-shaped eyes of our herm lack incised pupils and are framed by heavy eyelids that lend the gaze a timeless neutrality. The nose is straight and well proportioned, while the slightly parted mouth is small, with full lips. The full cheeks, together with the rounded chin, contribute to the youthful appearance of the figure. The entire face is characterized by an extremely soft treatment. The elongated neck ensures a smooth transition between the head and the torso, which is truncated in accordance with herm typology and reduced to a simple block.

The surface of our herm is generally smooth, despite a few minor visible alterations that testify to the antiquity of the work. A uniform ochre patina covers the whole. A horizontal joint line visible at the level of the forehead attests to restoration. The left part of the

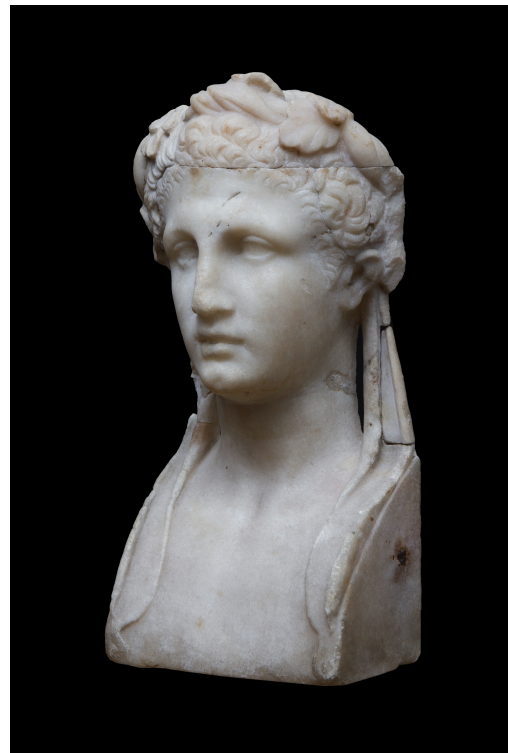


head, identifiable by a difference in the tone of the marble, corresponds to a later addition. By contrast, the area above the forehead, although fractured and reattached, belongs to the original sculpture. On the right side, a brownish stain suggests ancient oxidation or prolonged contact with a metallic element. At the back, a flat break may indicate either that it originally formed part of a double-headed herm or that it was cut flat for placement against a wall.



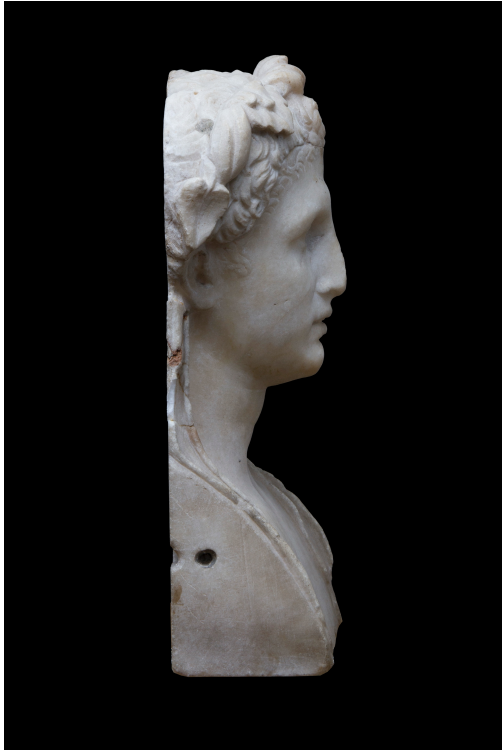
The iconography here combines a youthful representation of Hercules—the Roman equivalent of the Greek hero Heracles, son of Jupiter and famous for his Twelve Labors—with an unusual attribute: a crown of vine leaves. In iconographic tradition, Hercules is generally depicted as a mature, bearded hero with powerful musculature, wearing the lion skin and carrying a club. The choice of an idealized and youthful physiognomy thus departs from this canonical scheme. The introduction of the vine, for its part, refers to the Dionysian sphere and suggests a symbolic association with Bacchus, the god of wine, inebriation, and theater. It may here

refer to a mythological episode, namely the drinking contest between Hercules and Dionysus, as suggested by Elizabeth Bartman in relation to the herm of Hercules preserved in Liverpool (ill. 1). From this perspective, this type of representation could evoke a “Dionysian” Hercules, celebrating a more hedonistic and civilized aspect of the hero. Such an image is particularly well suited to the decoration of Roman villas, where references to banquets, wine, and leisure culture occupy a central place. Far from the image of the hero in action, this iconography emphasizes a serene figure integrated into the refined world of aristocratic life.



The choice of the herm form is also significant. Inherited from the Greek tradition associated with Hermes, the herm takes the form of a quadrangular pillar surmounted by a head or bust. In the Roman period, this type of support became widespread and was adapted to represent various deities and heroic figures, including Hercules. These sculptures fulfilled several functions: decorative, particularly in the

gardens and peristyles of villas; symbolic, embodying values such as strength, protection, or prosperity; and apotropaic, protecting spaces from harmful influences.



The diffusion of herms of Hercules is particularly well attested in Asia Minor, especially in southwestern cities such as Cos, Halicarnassus, Ephesus, Miletus, and Priene, where several examples have been recorded. This presence is confirmed both by numismatic sources (ill. 2 and 3), which testify to the circulation of this iconographic type, and by monumental remains. Among these is the Gate of Heracles at Ephesus (ill. 4), dated to the Late Empire and decorated with herm pillars depicting a beardless Heracles.

From a stylistic point of view, our sculpture can be associated with the so-called “Polykleitan” type of Heracles, derived from models attributed to Polykleitos, who is renowned for having developed a canon based on harmonious proportions and bodily balance. This type is known through numerous Roman copies, often fragmentary.

A particularly relevant parallel is provided by a herm preserved in the Antikensammlung in Berlin (ill. 5), identified as a replica of a classical original. As in our example, it displays a youthful physiognomy, an idealized treatment of the face, and the addition of decorative elements such as a headband (*taenia*) or a vegetal crown. A herm in the Vatican (ill. 6), belonging to the same type, also shows strong formal similarities, confirming that our work belongs to this classicizing tradition.

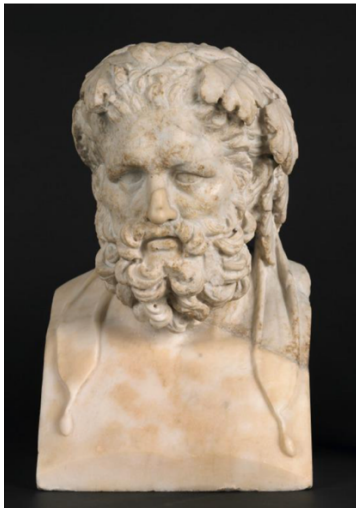


Other comparisons help situate our sculpture more broadly within Roman production, although they reflect a different conception of the hero. The herm of Heracles from the Villa of Poppaea at Torre Annunziata (ill. 7), as well as examples preserved in the British Museum (ill. 8) and the Capitoline Museums (ill. 9), dating from the 2nd century AD, display a more mature physiognomy and more pronounced musculature. Their more angular faces and strongly defined jaws convey a more virile and traditional image of Heracles. Nevertheless, despite these differences, it is

worth noting that the first two sculptures also feature vine leaves.

The observable restoration techniques suggest that the sculpture was present in a European collection as early as the 18th century, a period marked by a strong enthusiasm for Antiquity. The work is subsequently documented in a private English collection at Bullwood Hall (Hockley, Essex) between 1930 and 1950, before being preserved by descent within the same family until 2023.

Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Herm of Hercules, Roman, mid 2nd century AD, marble, H.: 35 cm., National Museum of Liverpool, no. inv.59.148.97.



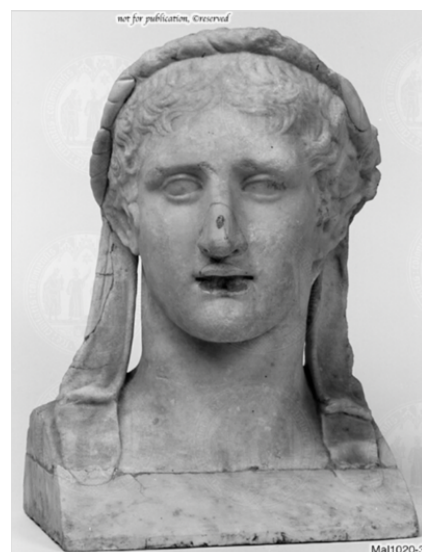
Ill. 2 et 3. Coins from Megalopolis issued under Caracalla and an example of a coin from Athens dating from the 2nd century AD.



Ill. 4. Gate of Heracles, Ephesus, late 4th century AD, Izmir.



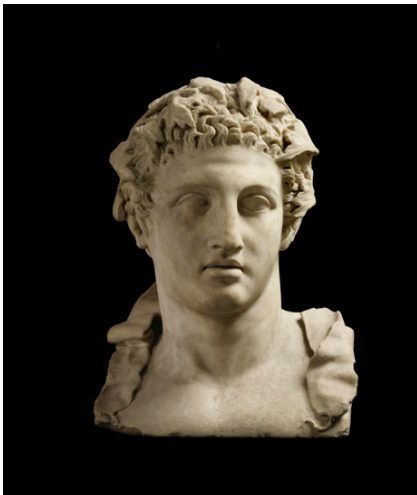
Ill. 5. Herm of Hercules polykletian-style, Roman, 80-90 AD, marble, H.: 34 cm. Staatliche Museen, Antikensammlung Berlin, Sk 478.



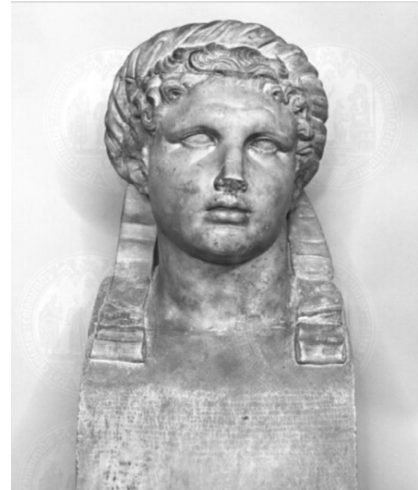
Ill. 6. Herm of Hercules polykletian-style, Roman, mid 1st century AD, marble, H.: 41 cm. Museo Gregoriano Profano ex Lateranense, no. iv. MV.10067.0.0



Ill. 7. Herm of Hercules, Roman, middle of the 1st century AD, marble, H.: 43.5 cm. Villa de Poppée Sabina, Torre Annunziata, no. inv. 73300



Ill. 8. Herm of Hercules, Roman, 2nd century AD, marble, H.: 26.5 cm. British Museum, London, no. inv. 1805,0703.76.



Ill. 9. Herm of Hercules, Roman, 2nd century AD, marble, H.: 65 cm. Capitoline Museum, no. inv. 7.