

SARCOPHAGUS RELIEF DEPICTING A WOMAN

ROMAN, 2ND-3RD CENTURY AD
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 15 CM.

WIDTH: 10 CM.

DEPTH: 10 CM.

*PROVENANCE:
FORMERLY IN A PRIVATE PARISIAN
COLLECTION SINCE AT LEAST 1950, THEN
PASSED DOWN THROUGH INHERITANCE
IN THE 2000S.*



This delicate marble head represents a female figure. The orientation of the head, its small scale, and its execution in high relief suggest that this fragment probably formed part of a larger composition, most likely a funerary relief or sarcophagus.

The head is depicted slightly inclined, while the face is turned towards the left. The hair is first seen beneath a diadem, followed by a veil that partially covers the top of the head and

falls down on either side. The hair is arranged in small, wavy locks, particularly visible around the forehead and temples. The relatively youthful face is idealised. The almond-shaped eyes, defined eyelids and eyebrows, and the gaze directed upwards and to the left are carefully modelled and particularly expressive. The mouth is small, with full, slightly parted lips. The cheeks are full and the chin rounded. The neck, inclined in the same movement as the head, survives only partially.

The treatment of the marble is based on a contrast between the smooth surfaces of the face and the more deeply worked areas of the hair and veil. The locks are rendered by incisions and grooves, while the folds of the veil are cut relatively deeply. This technique enables the sculptor to create contrasts of light and shade and to give greater depth to a work intended to be viewed only from the front.

The marble now displays a brown patina, with variations in colour and traces of erosion attesting to its age and exposure to the elements.

The identification of the figure remains uncertain. The combination of veil and diadem has several possible meanings in Roman art. It may be appropriate to a female deity, such as Juno or Ceres, but equally to a woman of high status, notably an empress or a Roman matron. In imperial portraits, women could be represented with attributes that brought them closer to the deities. The



veil could also evoke the status of a married woman or have a religious significance, particularly in the case of a priestess or a woman performing a cultic act.



The orientation of the head towards the left and its gaze suggest that she was intended to look towards another figure, a now-lost element, or perhaps an event taking place before her. The pronounced relief of the head and the less carefully worked treatment of the areas that would not have been visible may indicate that it was intended to be placed against a support, such as a sarcophagus. The 2nd and, above all, the 3rd century AD correspond to a period of significant development in the production of carved Roman sarcophagi, in which portraits of the deceased could be incorporated into mythological or funerary compositions. Comparison with certain imperial female portraits is particularly interesting, notably those of Sabina, wife of the emperor Hadrian, whose representations sometimes likewise combine the diadem and veil. A bust in the Chiragan Collection provides an example of this (ill. 1), while the closest

parallel is found in the Capitoline Museums, where a relief depicting the apotheosis of the empress Sabina is preserved (ill. 2). This relief belonged to the so-called 'Arch of Portugal' and was transferred to the Capitoline Museums in 1664, following the destruction of the arch. It depicts the emperor Hadrian witnessing the apotheosis of his wife Sabina, who is carried by a winged figure. However, the similarity of the facial features is not sufficient to identify this head with certainty as a portrait of Sabina.

Other parallels can be drawn with our head, such as, for example, a woman wearing a diadem preserved at the Metropolitan Museum (ill. 3), or a marble sarcophagus depicting the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus, in which, on the left, a seated woman is shown wearing the same attributes (ill. 4).



This delicate small head belonged to a private Parisian collection at least since 1950. It was subsequently passed down by inheritance in the 2000s, before entering our collection.

Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Bust of the Empress Sabina, Roman, 128-137 AD, marble, H.: 44 cm. Chiragan Collection, Musée Saint-Raymond, Toulouse, inv. no. Ra 76.



Ill. 2. Apotheosis of Sabina, Roman, 2nd century AD, marble, H.: 295 cm. Capitoline Museums, inv. no. MC1213.



Ill. 3. Head of a Woman Wearing a Diadem, Roman, 1st-2nd century AD, marble, H.: 14.9 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 23.160.5.



Ill. 4. Sarcophagus depicting the Story of Phaedra and Hippolytus, Roman, mid-3rd century AD, marble. Musée départemental de l'Arles antique, inv. no. 18040.