

ROMAN MARBLE BUST OF A YOUNG DEIFIED FLAVIAN PRINCE

Roman, 1st century A.D.

H: 31 cm (12.2 in)

Reference: 22521



The bust is currently mounted on a small capital and a cylindrical base with a concave profile (probably dating to the 18th century). A work of great artistic finesse, this is a life-size bust of a child who seems to be about four years old. The sculptor has perfectly rendered his young age with several elements: the domed forehead, the short, flattened nose, the somewhat sunken eyes, the full lips and cheeks, the narrow and rounded chin, the wrinkled neck. In addition, the hair covers the head like a thin and light, slightly untidy skullcap. The locks are rounded and wavy on the front of the head, but curly on the nape.

The dreamy, even melancholic expression of the child is accentuated by the position of his head, slightly tilted and turned to his left, with the gaze directed downwards: in such a young child, this attitude probably denotes his early death and hard fate. A miniature eagle appears at the base of the bust. The bird, with spread wings, flies off to take the boy into the sky. The symbol is clear: the young deceased is promised apotheosis, admission among the gods. The feathers of the eagle are indicated in a light, almost impressionistic way, which contrasts with the precise and realistic image of the child: one cannot exclude the possibility that this detail was later reworked (an acanthus leaf might primarily have been in the place of the eagle: the portrait would have thus served a funerary function only because of the death and deification of the boy).

The style enables us to date this piece to the last decades of the 1st century A.D., during the Flavian period. The remarkable quality of the work and the presence of the eagle indicate that he was a high-ranking, probably Imperial figure: he may therefore be a child of Domitian (Titus, brother of Domitian, had no heirs). The sculptor of the bust suggests that his young model was a crown prince, given the nature of his garment, not a common coat but a military pallium that the child has fastened on his left shoulder. The iconography of apotheosis has a famous precedent in the art of the Flavian period with the ascension to heaven of Titus, carved in relief under the main arch of his triumphal

arch located in the Forum.

Historically, the problems concerning the children of Domitian are complicated and may not have a conclusive solution: according to Suetonius (Life of Domitian, III, 1), his wife Domitia Longina, daughter of Corbulo (a general of the army under Nero), gave him a son in 73 A.D. This child, whose name remains unknown (Vespasian, according to some, Titus Flavius Caesar according to others), reportedly died in infancy before or just after the accession of his father (Domitian came to power in 81 A.D., after the death of Titus), as attested by coinage alluding to his deification and showing, in one example, a young child on a globe, his arms outstretched to the sky and surrounded by seven stars, and in another, a boy standing in front of his seated mother. According to the interpretations of modern criticism, the birth of two other children, a girl probably in 82 A.D. and another (a boy?) in 90, is possible, but no concrete evidence proves these elements, which remain largely hypothetical: this effigy presumably depicts the only certain heir of Domitian, the one who has been deified and who also appears on the Imperial coins of the Emperor and his wife. A head of a boy the same age, housed in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, has also been attributed to this young figure: however, it is not certain whether it is an individual portrait, since his features are highly idealized, especially in the eye area.

CONDITION

Ears and nose of the child barely chipped; head of the eagle now lost. Surface perfectly preserved and polished.

PROVENANCE

Ex- European private collection, mid to late 18th century, probably Charles Lennox (1735-1806), 3rd Duke of Richmond, London and

Goodwood;

Ex-Villa Rufolo; ex-Francis Neville Reid (1826-1892) collection;

Ex- Christie's, London, May 16th, 1972, lot 240;

Ex- Drouot, Paris, Delorme & Collin du Bocage, Tableaux. Mobilier, objets d'art, 2010. no. 226;

Ex- Sotheby's, New York, June 4th, 2014, lot 35.

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On the children of Domitian, see:

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DESNIER J.-L., *DIVUS CAESAR IMP DOMITIANI F.*, in *Revue des études anciennes* 81, 1979, pp. 54-65.

JONES B.W., *The Emperor Domitian*, London, 1992, pp. 33 ff.

On the deification of the young prince in coinage, see:

MATTINGLY H., *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, vol. II, *Vespasian to Domitian*, London, 1930, nos. 62-63, pl. 61.

SUTHERLAND C.H.V., *Münzen der Römer*, Fribourg, 1974, fig. 345-347.

On the head of a boy housed in Copenhagen, see:

POULSEN V., *Les portraits romains*, vol. II, *De Vespasien à la Basse-Antiquité*, Copenhagen, 1974, no. 16, pl. 30.