

DIADEM

Hellenistic, 4th - 3rd century B.C.

Gold

D: 16 cm (6.3 in) L: 37 cm (14.6 in)

Reference: 13806



This diadem consists of a long band made of gold sheet, its open ends fitted with volute-shaped clasps. The front supports a three dimensional ornament with pointed ends, separately crafted of gold sheet, with a half-column in the center. This column features a tripod rendered in relief. Set on its semicircular top is the small figure of Heracles as a child, wrestling with a snake. Three pointed leaves, also of gold sheet, are vertically attached to the diadem, forming a background to this scene. The central decoration is flanked by a centaur on the left and a galloping horse on the right, both rendered in relief.

The work's style, craftsmanship, and decorative motifs suggest that it was made by a Greek goldsmith during the Hellenistic period, but the particular shape is rare in Greek goldwork. It seems to have been made on the northern fringes of the Greek world, in a horse-breeding region where the myths of centaurs as well that of Heracles were particularly popular. The closest parallel to this piece is a gold diadem with three projecting leaves found in a fourth century B.C. tomb in Thrace.

Crown-like diadems with projecting leaves are occasionally depicted on Greek vases dating to the last quarter of the fifth and the first half of the fourth century B.C. The decoration revolves around Heracles with the relief in the center showing the hero's second labor: fighting the Hydra of Lerna, a snake-like monster with nine heads. The representation is, however, also a reference to story in which the infant Heracles strangled two snakes that Hera had sent to destroy him. Here, he is shown as a small, naked child wrestling with a snake—not as an adult wearing the lion skin and cutting off the Hydra's heads with a sword, as would be correct according to Greek mythology. The tripod that is set prominently in the diadem's center might be the oracle tripod that Heracles had tried to carry away from the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi. The centaur on the left, who throws a large stone, refers to the numerous encounters between Heracles and the centaurs. The horse

on the right might allude to the hero's eighth labor, the return of the horses of Diomedes from Thracia to Argos.

This object's original owner was no doubt a high-ranking person, and the decoration of the diadem might indicate their descent from the centaurs and a particular relationship to Heracles.

PROVENANCE

Ex – European private collection

EXHIBITED

Houston Museum of Natural Science, "GOLD! Natural treasure, cultural obsession", 2005.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

For the Thracian diadem, see

VLADIMIROVA-PAUNOVA V., An Unknown Rich Grave Find from Thrace (4th cent. B.C.), *Archeologica Bulgarica* 2, 2 (1998). pp. 40f., fig. 1.

For a diadem with four leaf-shaped extensions at the top in the Canellopoulos Collection, see

Bulletin de correspondance hellénique 104 (1980), pp. 408ff., no. 9, fig. 106.

For a krater of the Nikias Painter (c. 425–370 B. C.), see

BOARDMAN J., *Athenian Red Figure Vases: The Classical Period* (1989),

p. 167, no. 319.