

EXCEPTIONAL BYZANTINE MARBLE HEAD

Byzantine, 5th-6th century A.D.

Marble

H: 27 cm

Reference: 7940



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An exceptional marble head wearing a monumental, triangular-shaped diadem placed on the upper forehead. The face is finely carved and polished. The figure has a stately demeanor and fixes her gaze in front of her, at eyes level. These latter are slightly globular, bordered by a thick fold. The iris circle is engraved and the pupil is incised. Deep and marked arches indicate the eyebrows, forming a shadow that highlights the radiant eyes.

The cheeks are regular and slightly rounded; the cheekbones protrude very lightly. The nose and the chin are broken and the lips are damaged. It is still possible though to measure the finesse and precision that were displayed for the rendering of the flesh. The way hair is pulled back on the neck into a low chignon formed by curls sculpted in high relief; it is cropped neatly but does not equal the delicate modeling of the face.

The back of the head was split and reassembled. Traces of red pigmentation are still preserved in the hair whose curls were embellished with red ochre. Traces of brown paint are also visible on the upper forehead and on the temples, indicating perhaps a veil or a piece of the diadem. The diadem is composed of a triangular pediment, recalling that of a temple. It is surmounted by a tongue-shaped indentation whose length decreases toward the highest point of the crown. Two towers, formed of two tongues dug into a mass, are placed behind the ears. An old crack indicates that an element was placed below the pediment. This very special headpiece can be related, by its triangular shape, to the Byzantine monarchs crowns of the 5th century, which comprise typical pendants always reproduced on coins or proconsular ivories. Thus, it excludes the hypothesis of an imperial portrait. The monumental and defensive aspect of this headpiece,

which is very particular and iconographically isolated, can nevertheless be linked to the crowns of the allegories of important cities such as Rome, Antioch, Alexandria or Byzantium, these figures being descendants of the Roman Tyche, ancient protective deities of the cities.

Rome and Byzantium's allegories are regularly represented in the iconography of power. They embody the Western Roman Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire. They stand behind the throne of the consuls on the proconsular diptychs engraved on the occasion of their appointments.

Often wearing a helmet, and not anymore a tower like the ancient Tyche, their iconography evolves. The helmet is decorated with jewels and its shape refers to female hairstyles.

The two towers placed at the back of the ears, as well as the lost element at the back of the pediment recall the ornaments of the helmet the Byzantium figure wears.

PROVENANCE

Acquired on the European art market in 1997.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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