

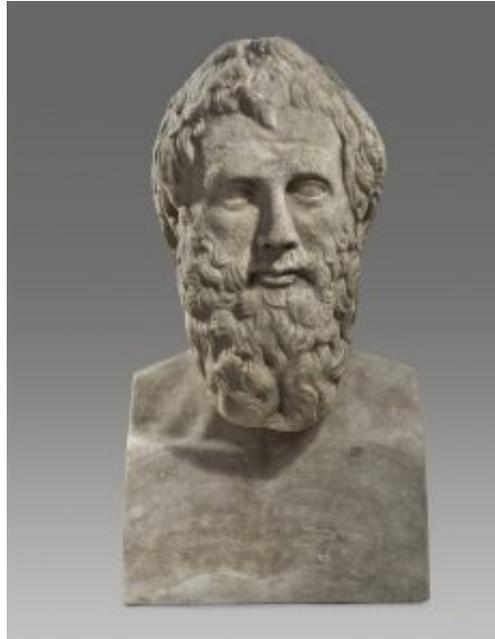
HERM WITH THE PORTRAIT OF A MAN OF LETTERS

Roman, 1st-2nd century A.D.

Marble

Height: 54 cm

Reference: 21221



This head mounted on a herm (which summarily depicts the shape of the shoulders) represents a man marked by age, as indicated by the wrinkles visible on the forehead and on the cheeks. His hair, freely composed of a multitude of deeply incised, thick and wavy locks, fully covers his head; it is also characterized by the presence, in the middle of the forehead, of a curly forelock.

The man has a long, thick beard, on which fall the two curling tips of his mustache. The mustache partly hides the small mouth with thick lips. The eyes, surmounted by arched eyebrows, convey a severe expression.

The shape of the beard and of the mustache recall other examples dated to the Classical period, but our head is most likely a Roman copy of a portrait of a Greek philosopher or a man of letters, who could be identified with the philosopher Zeno, born in Kition (Cyprus) and later established in Athens, where he founded the Stoic school. The shape and general appearance of the head, embellished with an imposing beard and thick hair, make this idea tempting. But the extensive restorations to the central part of the face and the absence of two thick vertical wrinkles above the nose (which are a distinctive feature in most of Zeno's portraits) force us to consider this interpretation with caution.

Among the portraits thought to be of Zeno, which according to archeologists would all be based on the same Greek original, now lost (a bronze sculpture that the Athenians dedicated to the philosopher, dated to the early 3rd century B.C.?), the two heads respectively housed in Aix-en-Provence and in Fulda are the closest parallels for our example.

It was a well established practice for wealthy Romans to possess portraits of the great figures of Greek literature, such as poets,

dramatists, historians and philosophers. This required, of course, owning a library, where such authors were represented. The effigies, often carved in the form of a bust or a herm, were displayed not only in the rooms devoted to reading but also in the promenade areas, porches and gardens.

Although Plato and Aristotle each had a place of honor among all these figures, other philosophers and men of letters were frequently represented and enjoyed great popularity. For instance, Zeno, who was considered the spiritual father of the Stoic doctrine, and Chrysippus, his doctrinal successor, were also very popular. The importance of the Stoic doctrine in Rome is highlighted by the fact that two extremely prominent figures, namely Seneca the Younger, the famous philosopher and tutor to Nero, and Marcus Aurelius, the last great emperor of the 2nd century A.D., were proponents of the theories founded by Zeno.

CONDITION

Complete, though face (eyebrows, nose, lips) restored. Surface in good condition, but grainy and unpolished. Minor cracks.

PROVENANCE

Probably with Antonio and Alessandro Jandolo, Rome; then with Stanford White, New York, 1905; Henry William Poor (1844-1915), of Standard & Poor's, Tuxedo Park, New York, since 1905.

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