

STATUETTE OF A HERM OF HERAKLES

Ro-Imperial, ca. 2nd century A.D.
modern gold mount
H: 8.6 cm
Reference: 18407



While sculptures of bronze and marble are among the most well-known artistic legacies of Greece and Rome, ancient artists also produced fine works of sculpture in other materials such as terracotta, ivory, gold, silver, glass, and rare or semi-precious stone. Some artists possessed the remarkable skills needed to transform hard stone into miniature sculpture worthy of comparison with the finest works in bronze and marble. This extraordinary and finely made statuette of Herakles is just such an object. It stands out as a masterwork, even when considered among the small number of other stone statuettes that are known, and testifies to the superior talent of artists who created such luxuria during the Roman Imperial Period. This type of herm representing Herakles first appears in the Greek Hellenistic period and becomes prevalent during Roman Imperial times. This herm is supported by a golden pedestal of 18th century date, following a custom of the time for mounting such rare objects.

Herakles, as a mortal being and the son of Zeus and Alcmene, is best known for the Twelve Labors, which he famously accomplished upon earth and therefore was welcomed into the company of gods on Olympos, where he enjoyed an eternally blissful existence. Of all the Greek gods and heroes, he became one of the most frequently represented figures in antiquity and achieved an enduring place in the history of art. In spite of its size and the difficulty of sculpting, this figure of Herakles is fully detailed and carved in the round. His somewhat relaxed pose perhaps expresses the fatigue experienced by this superhuman hero after completing all of his various Labors. The hero's head is slightly tilted downward as he looks to the left. He is depicted as an older man with a thick bushy beard, and his hair is indicated with small rounded curls. The hero is wrapped in a large himation (cloak), the folds of which are gathered in his left hand while his right arm and hand are completely enveloped by the garment. Additionally, Herakles wears the skin of the Nemean lion, which was acquired during the completion of his first Labor. The modeling on the

surface of the stone, which retains its original high polish, is varied by light passing through the stone and reflecting from the polished surface. Like counterparts in gold, silver, and other precious materials, gemstone statuettes were produced as luxury items. In a domestic setting, albeit for a very wealthy household, this statuette of Herakles may have been part of a lararium, a household shrine.

The relative scarcity of chalcedony and other stone statuettes is owed in part to the difficulty of cutting, grinding, and polishing complete figures from hard stone, which presented challenges well beyond those faced in the making of figures from other materials. The detail on this figure of Herakles is remarkable, since there is no evidence that ancient artisans used any type of magnifying lenses. While the Pliny remarks in his *Natural History* that gem-cutters used tools tipped with diamond chips for cutting the hardest stones, these would not have been needed for working chalcedony. A bow-driven cutting wheel was likely used to block out the figures. Fine abrasives like emery or "Naxian stone", were employed in conjunction with the cutting wheel for subsequent grinding and polishing.

A form of translucent quartz, chalcedony is found in Egypt and Asia Minor, as well as France and other regions. Used from the early third millennium B.C. for beads and seals, it was particularly favored by Greek seal-engravers of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. Chalcedony, broadly considered, includes cornelian, sard, plasma, bloodstone, onyx, sardonyx, and all types of agate. In its pure state, the stone ranges in color from white or gray to various shades of blue, while iron accounts for brown and red tones and the presence of nickel gives it an apple-green color. In the chapter of his *Natural History* devoted to gems, Pliny the Elder discussed different types of blue and green chalcedony, which he called iaspis. The term "chalcedony," derives from name of the port city of Chalcedon, located across the straits from Constantinople. Now the Kadikoy district of Istanbul, Chalcedon produces no chalcedony.

Although Pliny said that a type of cloudy chalcedony came from Chalcedon, it is likely that the stone was transported there from somewhere in Asia Minor and subsequently shipped from that port.

CONDITION

It stands out as a masterwork, and testifies to the superior talent of artists who created such luxuria during the Roman Imperial Period. This herm is supported by a golden pedestal of 18th century date.

PROVENANCE

Formerly in a private collection, 18th century (based on the mount);

Acquired on the London art market, ca. 1990.

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