

Corinthian Helmet

Iberian

6th - 5th Century B.C.

Bronze

H: 26cm

A wealthy Greek soldier or mercenary in the employment of another country's army was probably the first owner of this stunning Corinthian bronze helmet. Beautifully decorated with an inscribed grotesque Gorgon or Medusa on the fore-brow, and mirrored lions that prance up each cheek panel, it is a unique surviving artefact that provides insight into ancient Greek armoury and social history. Its motifs, creatively mixing real and imaginary figures, are inspired by the Greco-Oriental repertoire that spread through the Mediterranean during the Orientalist period as a result of trade between mainland Greece and the Near East, and echo the decorative vocabulary found on proto-Corinthian ceramics. Likewise, the method of engraving used on the helmet relates to the black-figure style of vase painting found in Corinth from around 670 B.C., in which incised lines are used to add detail to figure's silhouettes. Developed in the seventh century B.C., the Corinthian style of helmet had no holes for the ears, offering rounded protection at the cost of comfort, and also had a distinct phallic shaped nose guard. The decorated cheek pieces and neck guard are flared in a highly unique shape that offers manoeuvrability during combat. Contemporary Greek vase painting, such as the seventh-century B.C. Chigi Vase, and passages from the Iliad describing battle formations (Il. 13.130–33) suggest a horsehair and leather crest may have once been attached to the top ridge of the helmet, in a display of ornamentation mimicking the fur of a beast standing on end when threatened.1 Offering full facial protection and with padding originally glued on the inside, this helmet was part of the equipment of the hoplites, heavily armed soldiers whose appearance coincided with the adoption of new bronze weapons. Its origin is ascribed to a workshop in Argos.2 Art historical evidence suggests that these helmets were often worn pushed back on the head to reveal the face during times of peace, for example during processions and

festivities. The style's popularity endured for hundreds of years throughout Archaic and Classical Greece, and is commonly found on Greek and Roman sculpture of both mortal heroes and divine gods, drawing associations with a noble and glorious past.3 The Greeks revered it as a helmet type worn by valiant Homeric conquerors, and it was adopted by the Romans in their love of all things Hellenistic. Because of its deep bronze colour and lack of verdigris from oxidization, this exceptional helmet was probably discovered in water, perhaps as part of a shipwreck hoard. Its ornate decoration and excellent condition make this helmet one of the finest surviving pieces of early Greek armour known. A strikingly similar helmet was found in Haifa Bay, Israel, during construction works in 2007, and is now in the National Maritime Museum in Haifa, Israel (1). It is supposed that it belonged to a Greek mercenary working for the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho II, as no Greek colonies existed in Israel at the time, meaning that probably a band of travelling warriors from Ionia accidentally dropped it overboard. The similarities between the two helmets suggest that this example probably also originated in an early Greek colony in Ionia (modern-day west-coast Turkey). The Haifa helmet contains decorative beasts – snakes, lions and a peacock's tail are all inscribed into the surface, which still contains traces of its original gold-leaf – hinting that our example may once have been covered in the same precious metal.

Literature:

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