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Fragment from a Corinthian Helmet

Archaic Period, 6th-5th century B.C., Greek

Bronze

H: 19cm, W: 19cm

Ancient Greek city-states such as Corinth were defended by the hoplites (derived from the hopla or round shield), citizen-soldiers primarily armed with swords, spears and shields. Soldiers had to pay for their own weapons and body armours, excluding the poorer peasants and traders from the task of war.

The distinctive shape of the Corinthian helmet, with slits for the eyes and the mouth, a narrow nasal and broad cheek plates, was designed to offer maximum protection. The curved projection at the base of the helmet protected the soldier's neck. Beaten out entirely from one piece of bronze, it required exceptional skill on the part of the Greek artisans. It was often decorated with carvings and plumes of horsehair.

Out of combat, the helmet was worn pushed back on the forehead for comfort, as often depicted in Greek pottery, coins and sculptures. With the evolution of weaponry, more open-work helmet styles such as Thracian and Chalcidian examples became popular for combat, however the Corinthian helmet worn raised on the crown of the head became a symbol of warfare. As the Romans adopted earlier Greek styles of bronze and marble sculpture, they similarly appropriated the symbolic importance of the Corinthian helmet as an emblem of glory and conquest, and it adorned many statues of important

Roman military leaders.

Athena, the Greek goddess of warfare, was herself often depicted on coins and statues wearing a plumed Corinthian helmet pushed back upon her head, strengthening the association between this helmet type and divine conquest, while also providing archaeological evidence to illustrate how the helmet was both often worn, and adorned with feathers.

Corinthian helmets can be found in the collections of many major museums across the world, including the Louvre in Paris and the British Museum in London, which holds at least twenty examples in various states of survival.