

Head of a Triton

33.02 x 0 cm (13 x 0 inches)
Marble
Circa 2nd Century A.D., Antonine Period, Roman

A finely carved marble head of a male youth, captured in the moment of turning towards the true left side. The facial features continue the dynamism of the pose: the upwards-tilted eyes under the slender curved brows and the slightly parted mouth accentuate the sense of a figure caught mid-action.

The notably full lips, with a pronounced cupid's bow, are opened enough to reveal the line of upper teeth within the mouth; depictions of heroes and mythological creatures carved from the time of the Pergamon Altar onwards commonly reveal their teeth in this fashion. The cheeks and forehead are carved softly and very smoothly on either side of the strong, straight nose, as is the rounded chin. The forehead is unusually short, suggesting that this head comes from a representation of a mythological creature.

The hair grows upwards and outwards from the forehead in long, voluminous waves, framing the face and flowing down to the base of the neck. The waves are carved in a variety of depths, creating the impression of thick and cascading locks.

Along with the smooth, polished planes of the face, the deep drilling suggests the piece is of late Antonine workmanship.

The crown of the head, behind the front layer of curls, is carved with simple waves flattened onto the

contour of the skull. The reverse is rough and unworked, suggesting that this piece was originally part of a large-scale relief.

This head bears striking similarity to the pair of tritons now in the Musei Capitolini, Rome (MC1119 and MC1121). Both of the Capitoline tritons exhibit the dynamic, partially turned over-shoulder gaze, with smooth, polished surfaces, long waved locks and full parted lips. They are dated between 180 and 193 A.D. and originally appeared alongside two kneeling Amazons framing the famed portrait of Commodus as Hercules in the Horti Lamiani complex.

Taken altogether, this suggests that this head represents a youthful Triton of the same type and originally appeared as part of a relief composition of monumental scale.

The Tritons have the following appearance. On their heads they growhair like that of marsh frogs not only in color, but in the impossibility of separating one hair from another. The rest of their body is rough with fine scales just as is the shark. Under their ears they have gills and a man's nose; but the mouth is broader and the teeth are those of a beast. Their eyes seem to me blue, and they have hands, fingers, and nails like the shells of the murex. Under the breast and belly is a tail like a dolphin's instead of feet. - Pausanias, Description of Greece (2nd century A.D.), trans. W.H.S. Jones, Litt. D. and H.A. Ormerod (Cambridge and London, 1918), 9.21.1.

Taking their name from the Greek god of the sea and son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, Tritons or Tritones were the half-human, half-fish servants of the major sea gods. This class of mermen was frequently depicted on pottery from as early as sixth-century B.C. Greece and increased in popularity from the late Hellenistic and into the Roman Imperial periods.

At different times, Tritons could be depicted as humans with one long fishtail or a forked tail, often with horse forelegs or wings at the base of the tail and sometimes with crustacean elements. Their representations fall into two types: the elder, bearded kind and youths whose long wavy locks emulate the ever-changing waters of their sea home.

Their human aspects were generally shown with scales or gills, in keeping with Pausanias's Description of Greece (2nd century A.D.), which was supposedly based on his examination of a Triton specimen exhibited in Rome and a headless one from Tanagra (most likely taxidermied fabrications).

Tritons tended to be associated with particular bodies of water or maritime regions, where they served as guardians of the seas who assist those who travel through their waters. They were also able to calm wild storms or summon sea creatures by blowing on their conch shell horns. They are frequently shown and described as preceding Poseidon's chariot to calm the waves before his approach.

Thus, their inclusion in sculptural groups was often associated with naval dominion, as in the Capitoline grouping and a cameo of Emperor Augustus, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien (IXa 56).

Tritons also had a more bacchic aspect, akin to satyrs and fauns. They were said to drink the waves as wine and are frequently depicted abducting the female sea nymphs (nereids).

In line with this, Tritons make frequent appearances in sculptural groups representing joyful celebrations, for instance as nereids' steeds in marine thiasoi (aquatic triumphal processions), like that on the 'Altar of Domitius Ahenobarbus' in the Munich Glyptothek (239).

According to Claudius Aelianus's De Natura Animalium (3rd century A.D.), 'when Poseidon drove his chariot over the waves, all other great fishes as well as dolphins and tritons too, sprang up from their deep haunts and gambolled and danced around the chariot, only to be left utterly and far behind by the speed of his horses'.

In a more sinister role, the Triton's female counterpart, the Tritoness, was sometimes conflated with the man-eating sirens from Homer's Odyssey.

Literature:

Antiquities & Ancient Art: Including Property from the Brummer Collection, Hindman, Chicago, 5 December 2023, Lot 19, front cover, pp. 7, 34-37, 197.