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Head of a beardless royal attendant, possibly a eunuch

Period: Neo-Assyrian

Date: ca. 721–705 B.C.

Geography: Mesopotamia, Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Sharrukin)

Culture: Assyrian

Medium: Gypsum alabaster

Dimensions: 21 1/2 x 19 in. (54.6 x 48.3 cm)

Classification: Stone-Reliefs

Credit Line: Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1933

Accession Number: 33.16.2

Not on view

Soon after taking the throne, the Assyrian king Sargon II (r. 721–705 B.C.) founded a new capital city, Dur-Sharrukin (literally "fortress of Sargon"), at a site known today as Khorsabad. Sargon took the throne in a coup against his brother, Shalmaneser V (r. 726–722 B.C.), and it is possible that by moving to a new capital he hoped to consolidate his regime. The name Sargon, meaning "true king," was a throne name, and referred to a very ancient king, Sargon of Akkad, who by the Neo-Assyrian period was remembered as a legendary hero. Building work at Dur-Sharrukin continued throughout Sargon's reign, with not only a main palace but a constellation of palaces and temples as well as the city itself under construction. However, the immense project was abandoned in 705 B.C. with the king's death. His son Sennacherib would move the capital once again, to Nineveh, and there embark on a new monumental building program.

This relief fragment comes from the main palace at Khorsabad and shows the head of a beardless male figure, probably a eunuch. Eunuchs played a major role in the Assyrian court and palace administration, and are frequently depicted in the reliefs that decorated the palace. This head is thought to come from a larger scene showing a group of beardless courtiers carrying vessels and furniture for a banquet or celebration. Although they are depicted serving the king, the figures are richly dressed, indicating their high status within the Assyrian court. The head in this fragment wears the elaborate hairstyle typical for an Assyrian courtier, as well as a large earring with three projecting studs, one of several styles seen in the reliefs. Comparable earrings have been discovered in the tombs of royal women at Nimrud, where they are made of gold and set with colorful stones such as banded agate.

Reliefs from Khorsabad are notable for their sometimes extremely large scale and their frequent use of high relief. Here the relief projects further from the background surface and takes on a more rounded, modeled form than is typical in the reliefs of Sargon's predecessors or successors.

Provenance

1843-45, excavated by Paul E. Botta; 1845, probably collected by Alexander Hector and forwarded by Christian Rassam to Sir Stratford Canning, Constantinople; 1845-1846, gift of Sir Stratford Canning to the Marquis of Lansdowne, London; 1930, purchased by Ernst or Joseph Brummer for J. D. Rockefeller at the sale of the Lansdowne collection of ancient marbles, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, lot 51; 1931, on loan by J. D. Rockefeller to the Museum; acquired by the Museum in 1933, gift of J. D. Rockefeller.

Exhibition History

"The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Selections from the Collection of the Ancient Near East Department," MOA Museum of Art, Atami, Japan, The Aiche Prefectural Art Gallery, Nagoya, Japan, The Seibu Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan, 1983.

References

A. H. Smith, ed. 1889. A catalogue of the ancient marbles at Lansdowne house, based upon the work of Adolf Michaelis: with an appendix containing original documents relating to the collection. London: printed for private circulation, no. 119.

Christie, Manson and Woods. 1930. Catalogue of the celebrated collection of ancient marbles, the property of the most honorable the marquess of Lansdowne. 5 March 1930, London, lot 51.

Winlock, Herbert E. 1933. "Assyria: A New Chapter in the Museum's History of Art." *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* 28 (2), p. 20.

Louchheim, Aline B. 1949. "Near-Eastern Art Placed on Display: Metropolitan Shows Works That Date to 5,000 Years Ago -- Diverse Races Covered." *The New York Times*, p. 19.

Harper, Prudence O. et al. 1983. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Selections from the Collection of the Ancient Near East Department*, exh. cat. Tokyo: Chunichi Shimbun, no. 21.

Albenda, Pauline. 1986. *The Palace of Sargon, King of Assyria: Monumental Wall Reliefs at Dur-Sharrukin, from Original Drawings Made at the Time of Their Discovery in 1843-1844 by Botta and Flandin*. Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, pp. 46, 64-65, 93, 129, fig. 72, pl. 48.

Collins, Paul. 2012. "From Mesopotamia to the Met: Two Assyrian Reliefs from the Palace of Sargon II." *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 47, pp. 77-83, fig. 3.

Timeline of Art History

Timelines

[Mesopotamia, 1000 B.C.-1 A.D.](#)

MetPublications

["From Mesopotamia to the Met: Two Assyrian Reliefs from the Palace of Sargon II": Metropolitan Museum Journal, v. 47 \(2012\)](#)

Department

[Ancient Near Eastern Art \(6.185\)](#)

Artist / Maker / Culture

[Assyrian \(476\)](#)

Object Type / Material

[Alabaster \(1,271\)](#)

[Gypsum \(1,321\)](#)

[Reliefs \(3,527\)](#)

[Sculpture \(25,901\)](#)

[Stone \(7,668\)](#)

Geographic Location

[Asia \(70,941\)](#)

[Iraq \(2,507\)](#)

[Khorsabad \(3\)](#)

Date / Era

[1000 B.C.–A.D. 1 \(33,071\)](#)

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The Ancient Way of Life. Head of a beardless royal attendant, possibly a eunuch. Period: Neo-Assyrian Date: ca. 721–705 B.C. Place of origin: Mesopotamia, Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Sharrukin) Culture: Assyrian Medium: Gypsum alabaster. Marble grave stele of an old man life-size marble statues were popular on Athenian cemeteries from the fifth to late fourth century BC. This old man is most likely not the person who was buried at the grave site, the old man is looking down at him (or her). The realistic style in which the made was done is typical for the fourth century BC. Eunuchs and Castrati. The emotive word 'eunuch' usually refers to a man or boy who was a harem attendant or a functionary in certain Asian courts and was derived from the Greek word eunoukhos, 'a castrated person employed to take charge of the women of a harem and act as chamberlain.' The Greek word is derived from eun, 'bed,' and ekhein, 'to keep' Usually castration involves the removal of the testes before puberty thus preventing the physical changes of manhood; muscle mass never develops, the voice never deepens, the penis never grows larger, hence mo