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Ancient Roman Harnessed Snake Fragment
Ancient Roman, 1st – 2nd century A.D.

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ROMAN

Ancient Roman Harnessed Snake Fragment

1st-2nd century A.D.

Marble

28 x 13 x 13 cm

33cm high on its base

H 11 x W 5 1/8 x D 5 1/8 in.

13 in. high on its base

Provenance

Private collection, Spain.

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Rarely in the art-historical context we come to deal with such a curious piece with an equally intriguing background. At first glance, this sculptural element does not seem to resemble anything immediately identifiable, and in fact, it can justifiably be counted as a unicum in the roman art scene, yet it conceals aspects that allow for extensive investigation into Greek myth and archaic cults. The material of composition is a white marble with a relatively fine grain, probably either a Pentelic if of Greek origin or a Lunense if Italian.

There are laces of the so-called caestus. They look like harnesses, a yoke or a bridle of a certain complexity. Furthermore, the other elements present suggest that the fragment might be the body of a large snake. We note three main renditions, one with scales for the back, a second with undulating grooves for the belly and finally the anthropic elements. The artistic characterisation of the belly, when placed in a polychrome context, is extremely relevant to the world of reptiles. Similar details—such as black spots forming a wave pattern—are not extraneous to the anatomy of snakes of the colubrid family. The laces and bands of various shapes and fine workmanship—including a belt with a buckle on the back—indicate the importance of what was harnessed. On the back a slight arching is perceptible, an element that reveals the evident presence of a backbone.

Some intriguing technical elements are given by the presence of slight gradine chisel marks on the upper portion of the belly, on a small part of the upper back and on an abundant half of the right flank. These are all clearly unfinished areas, in which both the belly and back scales are not present, leading us to state that the work, caestus (unlikely) or snake torso (likely), that it is, was not completed for unknown reasons.

The presence of harnesses on a snake immediately leads us to the myth of Demeter and Persephone Kore, the latter's abduction and the birth of the mystery cult of Eleusis. The chariot of the matron goddess of agriculture and the harvest was drawn by two serpents, in the myths reported as dragons (*δράκοντες*), artistically represented as reptiles without legs, often with crests and wattles, but sometimes provided with wings. There are many sarcophagi depicting Demeter on the chariot drawn by two serpents in search of her daughter—abducted by Hades, king of the Underworld—but this vehicle is not an attribute that can be associated solely with the Great Mother. Triptolemus, son of the king of Eleusis, was given an identical, if not the same, chariot by Demeter in order to instruct the peoples of the world on how to cultivate, thus becoming its emissary and laying the ancestral foundations, although not of real establishment, for the famous initiatory cult already mentioned, a mystical reality adhered to in historical times by illustrious figures such as the emperors Augustus¹, Hadrian², and many others. An excellent summary of the myth is provided by Pseudo-Hyginus, *Fabulae* (147):

When Demeter was hunting for her daughter, she came to King Eleusinus, whose wife Cothonea had borne the boy Triptolemus... On Triptolemus she [Demeter] conferred everlasting honour, for she

¹ Harold R. Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration*, II 1.

² Aelius Spartianus, *Historia Augusta, Hadrianus*, 13.1.

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gave him her chariot yoked with Serpents to spread the cultivation of grain. Riding in it he sowed grain throughout the earth. When he returned, Celeus bade him be killed for his benefactions, but when this was known, by Ceres' order he gave the kingdom to Triptolemus, who called it Eleusis from his father's name. He also established sacred rites in honour of Ceres, which have called in Greek Thesmophoria.

A very brief idea is also presented to us by Nonnus in *Dionysiaca* (13. 188) regarding the relationship of Triptolemus with the two mythological creatures under discussion: "Those born of the blood of Triptolemos: who once [flew] through the air, with his load of corn ears, and lashed the serpents' backs."

And again, a passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (5. 643) describes the context well:

Bounteous Demeter yoked her Serpent-Pair to her chariot, and fixed the curbing bits and made her way between the earth and sky to Tritonia's city [Athens], and brought the chariot to Triptolemus, and gave him seed and bade him scatter it. Partly in virgin land and part in fields long fallow. Scouring high the young prince rode through Europe and the realms of Asia till he came to Scythia, where Lyncus ruled, and entered the king's palace. Lyncus asked how he had come, his journey's cause, his name and country. "Famous Athens is my country" he answered, "and my name is Triptolemus. No sail brought me by sea, nor foot by land, the sky lay wide to give me way. I bring the gifts of Demeter. If you sow them wide over your ploughland, they will give you back bountiful harvests, gentle nourishment". That barbarous king was jealous, and to gain himself the credit for that gift so great lavished his hospitality, and when his guest was sunk in sleep, attacked him with a dagger. As he tried to stab his heart, Demeter transformed the king into a lynx; then bade the youth of Mopsosius [Triptolemos] drive her pair of Sacred Serpents homeward through the air.

From here we can see how the snake—winged serpent-like dragon as it—can be rightly linked to the concept of prosperity and abundance, becoming an immediately recognisable Mediterranean symbol and, in the cases mentioned, a visibly "domesticated" creature at the service of the divinities and the royalties linked to them. There is, however, another possible identification option, substantially the same in its formal presentation, but different from a contextual point of view. Medea, one of the most iconic divine women of the ancient world, sorceress and priestess, as well as Jason's wife and his helper in the quest for the Golden Fleece, has a close connection with the serpent-drawn chariot. Following the atrocious infanticide of which she is guilty, according to the play by Euripides³, she is rescued in a chariot

³ Euripides, *Medea*, 1317-1322.

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drawn by snakes, a vehicle which, given Medea's words put into her mouth by the famous tragedian, is given to her by Helios, her father's father.

There is a very interesting open question as to the ownership of the said chariot, since the solar deity, despite having famous connections with snakes and dragons, does not have a locomotion vehicle pulled by reptiles, as are those of Demeter and Triptolemus. In fact, an article by Dr. Cataldo⁴ discusses how this is more a sort of stylistic and figurative escamotage, as well as a way of linking the myth of Medea to the fundamental figure of Theseus, Athens' hero par excellence and its most shining representative. Euripides' theatrical portrayal will thus give rise to an indissoluble formal union, in which the chariot of Demeter and then of Triptolemus will also become paradigmatic for the events involving Medea.

Ovid again, *Metamorphoses* (7, 350 and 391) gives us some details about the dragons:

[Medea flees Thessalia after the murder of King Pelias:] Had she [Medea] not soared away with her winged Serpents; she surely must have paid the price. Aloft, over the peak of shady Pelion... she fled, and over Othrys... [Until] at last, borne on her Vipers' wings, she [Medea] reached Ephyra [Corinth], Pirene's town... But when her witch's poison had consumed the new wife, and the sea on either side had seen the royal palace all in flames, her wicked sword was drenched in her son's blood; and, winning thus a mother's vile revenge, she fled from Jason's sword. Her Dracon team, the Dracones Titaniaci, carried her away to Palladiae [the city of Athens].

While Seneca's *Medea* (V, III, 978-983) shows us the sorceress' escape:

[Medea has slain her children by Jason in Corinth]
Medea: I am wont to flee. A way through the air has opened for me; two Serpents offer their scaly necks bending to the yoke... I through the air on my winged car shall ride. Jason: Go on through the lofty spaces of high heaven and bear witness, where thou ridest, that there are no gods.

Throughout this series of quotations presented, elements appear that are immediately identifiable in the piece in question: the scales and the yokes. The wings have evidently not survived, but their previous presence cannot be excluded. Further artistic parallels can be made if we examine the glyptic sphere. In a splendid sardonix cameo from the mid 1st century AD, we find two figures—Demeter and Triptolemus—on a chariot pulled by winged serpents. The jewel in question—which was also owned by Louis XIV—now housed in the Cabinet des Médailles, is said to represent Claudius and his wife Messalina, or perhaps Agrippina the Younger, in their respective and divine roles mentioned above. The Emperor scatters seeds through

⁴ Concetta Cataldo, *Medea sul carro di Trittolemo. Un mito ateniese*. Iconodramma: La Rivista di Engramma.

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his paludamentum, while his consort, with wheat ears and poppy bulbs on her left, leans forward inciting the two large winged reptiles.

There can therefore be no doubt as to what the marble element presented here represents, but the question of its context, both mythological and pragmatic use, remains open. Indeed, this last point lends itself well to numerous possible conjectures. What is clear is that a sculptural fragment of this type is of a quite unique importance in the antiquarian scenario, as there is no serpentiform find with a yoke in any public collection, without of course considering the decorative elements of bas-reliefs found on sarcophagi. In this case we are talking about a fragment with a very important spatial independence, with well-defined and unfinished traces of workmanship, which makes it art-historically and stylistically unique.



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