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*Ancient Roman Leg with Sandle and a Tree
Trunk*

Ancient Roman, 1st – 2nd century A.D.

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SELJUK

Fragment of a Frieze

12th century A.D.

Stone

17 x 23.5 cm;

6 3/4 x 9 1/4 in.

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This fragment of a carved stone frieze, chipped on several sides, is decorated in low relief with a dense and symmetrical arabesque of interlacing tendrils and split-palmettes, inhabited by several human and animal heads. Near the top a small, frontal human face gazes out from the heart of the scrollwork, flanked by paired creatures whose bodies dissolve into the foliage. Below, a knotted medallion of intertwined stems descends to further masks; feline, in this case, emerging from the curling vines at the lower edge. The whole field is punctuated by drilled points that catch the light, and the creamy stone, worn smooth across its raised surfaces and freshly exposed at the breaks, retains a soft warmth of tone.

The decoration is worked in shallow relief, the ground cut back only slightly so that the design stands in flat, softly bevelled, ribbon-like bands. These form a vertical, broadly bilaterally symmetrical composition of scrolling stems and split-palmettes (*rumi*), articulated throughout by small round, a characteristic accent of the period. Woven into the scroll along the central axis is a stacked column of heads: at the top a small frontal human face, with summarily cut eyes, nose and mouth, flanked by two creatures whose curving necks dissolve into the tendrils; below, a symmetrical knot of interlacing stems enclosing a leaf-shaped void with a single drilled boss at its centre; lower still, two small eared, possibly feline, masks facing outward; and at the broken lower edge two larger heads, feline once more, emerge downward from the curling stems. The worn, lightly encrusted surface and the softening of the raised passages are consistent with age and probable burial. Figural ornament of this kind featuring heads and creatures growing out of a vegetal scroll recurs across medieval Islamic art and represents the convergence of multiple strands of inherited imagery, including: adapted Sasanian and Byzantine imperial imagery, Central Asian Turkic heritage of the dynasty, and pre-Islamic animist belief systems. Central Asian shaman tradition and ancient Eastern art greatly influenced Seljuk animal figures, especially in the slanted-cut techniques deployed, the stylized forms, and the use of the Turco-Chinese twelve-animal calendar.

The Seljuks, a dynasty of Turkic origin, came to rule a vast territory stretching from Central Asian and Iran across Iraq, the Jazira, and Syria, with the related Seljuks of Rum established in Anatolia. Their Golden Age spanned the eleventh to thirteenth centuries and produced architectural ornament of exceptional richness in brick, stucco, and carved stone. The Seljuks excelled in carved architectural elements, such as portals, arches, capitals, inscriptions, and friezes, incorporating vegetal and geometric motifs, calligraphy, and figural elements including various birds and animals, most of which was worked in high relief. Figural decoration of this kind ornamented the walls and friezes of Seljuk palaces and courtly buildings, where motifs of this type would run as a continuous decorative band.

Even reduced to a fragment, this panel conveys the confidence and fantasy of twelfth-century Seljuk carving, evident in the ludic interplay of vegetal scroll and living form that gives rise to a teeming, half-hidden menagerie of faces. It stands as a fine and characteristic example of the figural arabesque that distinguishes the decorative art of the Seljuk period.