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Monumental Head of a Goddess (likely Niobe)

Late Hellenistic Greek or Early Roman Imperial Period, ca. 1st century B.C. – 1st century A.D.

Alabaster

50.7 x 30 x 29 cm.;

20 x 11 3/4 x 11 3/8 in.

Provenance

Collection of Guido Sestieri (Rome), by 1951;

Private Collection (Rome), 1970s;

Catalogued in Carabinieri restitution papers declaring the property of the Sestieri collection, cleared for export and trade, 2008.

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The present over life-size head would have originally been set into a full body sculpture of a woman, most likely Niobe. The most complete comparable example is the Niobe currently housed in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, which was discovered along with several other sculptures depicting her dying children, called Niobids. This sculptural group was a popular composition in antiquity beginning in the Hellenistic Period. Pliny (*HN* 36.28) reports that a sculptural group of the “dying children of Niobe” was displayed at the Temple of Apollo Sosianus in Rome. These sculptures dramatize Apollo and Artemis killing the twelve children of Niobe, a mythical queen of Thebes, as punishment for her claiming to have outstripped Leto (the mother of the twin gods) in her number of children. Homer (*Il.* 24.603-10) reports that afterwards the Niobids were turned to stone before being buried by the gods, and that Niobe too turned to stone in her grief and, mourning still, became a peak on Mount Sipylus (modern Mount Spil, in Manisa, Turkey).

Extant marble—and in this case alabaster—renderings of Niobe and her children are thought to be based on an original Greek group from the late fourth or third century B.C., perhaps by the master Skopas. Replication of Greek models by Roman sculptors should not be seen as the simple work of copyists. Rather, recreation of Greek models was a complex intellectual process of quotation and recontextualization, as is evidenced by Roman sculptors’ tendency to change aspects of the original composition, scale, and even the subject matter to properly prepare a sculpture for its intended purpose. In this case, the present head of Niobe maintains the over life-size scale and dramatic pathos of other examples and was most likely part of a group dedicated at a temple for public display, such as the previously mentioned group at the Temple of Apollo Sosianus. We may note that the present alabaster head is not a faithful copy of the Uffizi Niobe type, but a variant or adaptation inspired by the lost Classical original. In particular, the tilt of the head differs, as does the arrangement of the hair at the back of the figure.

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A notable feature of this head is that the crown of the head and the back of the hair, now lost, was in antiquity a separately carved piece of stone attached by a square block called a tenon, the indentation for the insertion of which is visible on the reverse. This technique, called piecing, is a Greco-Roman method not usually attested in post-antique European sculpture, and is an important indication of the actual date of this piece, which should be assigned to the 1st century B.C. or A.D. Though the original material context of this head is lost to us now, the use of alabaster points to North Africa, in particular Egypt, as the place of manufacture, where there was a strong tradition of carving this particular large-grained variety of alabaster since Pharaonic times.

It is important to note that the use of alabaster, a costly and exotic material, in such a large scale is quite unusual and was incredibly expensive to commission. A further indication of the rarity and fineness of this material comes from the fact that the underside of the neck has been finished for insertion into a draped torso, which would have been made from a less precious stone, while the alabaster would have been reserved for the skin of the hands and face.

References:

For the official comprehensive publication of the Uffizi group, see G. Mansuelli, *Galleria Degli Uffizi: Parte I* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1958) 110-119; pls. 70-80.

For Niobid groups, see B. S. Ridgway, *Hellenistic Sculpture I* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) 81-84; pls. 44-47, and R.R.R. Smith, *Hellenistic Sculpture: A Handbook* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991) 139-142.

For the use of alabaster and other colored stones in Classical Antiquity, see M. De Nuccio and L. Ungaro (eds.), *i marmi colorati della Roma imperiale*, (Venice: Marsilio, 2002).

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Comparanda:



(left) Uffizi Galleries, Florence; *(right)* Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.