

Head of a Saracen King
Southern France
c. 1120 - 50



32 x 19 x 22cm; limestone, breaks at the left side of the forehead, the tip of the nose and on the bottom part of the right cheek; general surface wear typical of the age of the sculpture

Provenance

Wooden mount made in Paris by the Japanese cabinetmaker Kichizō Inagaki (1876-1951), Paris, (incised with his monogram);
 With Charles Ratton, Paris, 1949;
 with Louis Manteau, Brussels, 1957;
 Gustaaf Vanderhaegen, Ghent;
 thence by descent in his family

A Romanesque grimacing head, carved with a frightful expression and stylised hair. The head wears a rounded crown decorated by incisions, which separate into wedges at the top. The rim of the crown is decorated by a band with zig-zags. Neither royal nor ecclesiastical, the headdress is analogous to the crowns worn by early Gothic figures identified in scholarship as Old Testament prophets.¹ The stylised hair of the sculpture is parted down the centre and is tucked behind the ears. The large, almond shaped eyes have drilled pupils and prominent lids, which are pinched at the inner corners. The most striking feature of this sculpture is the grimace – a dramatically downturned and opened lips, revealing a set of defined teeth. Although there is no facial hair above the lips, the chin is covered by a thick beard composed of tubular strands. This, along with the relatively wide nose, suggests that the head might be a representation of someone of non-European race. The detailed carving at the top of the head as well as its size suggest that this was once a full figure, and the unfinished back is evidence that the sculpture

¹ Chuck Little, *Set in Stone: The Face in Medieval Sculpture* (Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 2006), 84. See also Xavier Dectot, ed. *Sculptures des XIe-XIIe siècles: Romanet premier art gotique: catalogue/ Musee National du Moyen Age-Thermes de Cluny*. (Paris, 2005), 69.

was not meant to be viewed in the round. The roughness of the right side of the sculpture and the position of the strip of uncarved surface on the back suggests that the sculpture is meant to be viewed from a three-quarter view – perhaps because it was meant to have been communicating with another figure to its left.

The style of this head is generally representative of late Romanesque sculpture and it can be linked to early 12th century architectural sculpture from Southern France. One close comparison is the relief depicting the Temptation of Christ, now in the Glencairn Museum (fig. 1). The devil's expression and the carving of the eyes on both figures finds parallels with our sculpture. The grimace of the devil, however, is to be expected here. On our sculpture, such an expression is a unique occurrence, especially as the style of the headdress and the size of the head is consistent with portal figures. Although teeth are not unusual on Romanesque portals, they are mostly present on smaller figures such as devils or other monstrous creatures. They appear on corbels or on column swallowing capitals. Prophets, who wear this type of headdress, however, are always depicted with serene facial expressions, staring into space whilst holding back any kind of emotion.

It has been suggested in mid-century descriptions that this head may have been a figure of a soldier. Perhaps this identification may be taken one step further to identify this figure as a Saracen or a Mongol soldier. This would potentially explain the shape of the headdress, which in its association with prophets may actually symbolise a ruler from the east, as well as the wide nose, the coarse beard and the grimace. In her book *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art*, Debra Higgs Strickland explains that eastern men were known in the Middle Ages collectively as the Monstrous Races. 'Medieval Christians broadened the spectrum of Them to include not just the monstrous men of the East, but any living non-Christian, local or distant.'² And it was in the era of the Crusades that there was an acceleration in the production of negative imagery of those from the East. Although most examples of this survive in manuscripts, they are also present in stone, stained-glass, metalwork and ivory (fig. 2-3). One example in stone is the famous capital showing a battle between a Saracen and a crusader knight comes from the exterior of the Palacio Real de los Reyes de Navarra, where the Saracen is depicted with a large head, a wide nose and a grimace (fig. 4). Grimacing and wearing Eastern headdresses, these figures are sometimes depicted as hybrids – the head of a human but the body of an animal – but almost always as a threat. Although the context of this head is still a mystery, thinking about the portrayal of race and the 'Other' in Medieval Art might allow us closer to identifying it.

Literature

Dectot, Xavier. ed. *Sculptures des XIe-XIIe siecles: Romanet premier art gotique: catalogue/ Musee National du Moyen Age-Thermes de Cluny*. Paris, 2005.

Little, Chuck. *Set in Stone: The Face in Medieval Sculpture*. Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 2006.

Higgs Strickland, Debra. *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art*. Princeton, 2003.

² Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton, 2003), p.7.



Fig. 1
Temptation of Christ
French Pyrenees, Collegiate Church of Saint-Gaudens
Glencairn's Medieval Gallery (09.SP.25a,b)
12th century



Fig.2
Manticore
England, Salisbury
c. 1240
Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 764, fol. 25



Fig. 3
Richard the Lionhart and Saladin
Luttrell Psalter
1335-40
Manuscript (Add. MS 42130)
British Library, London



Fig. 4
Capital from the Exterior
Spain, Palacio Real de los Reyes de Navarra
c. 1200