

**Capital with scenes of Adam and Eve and Hippogryphs**  
**France, Bordeaux**  
**c. 1100**



*39 x 40 x 42 cm; limestone, general surface abrasion, losses to the heads of the figures*

*Provenance:*

Private Collection, Spain

A monumental capital carved in the round with two hippogryphs and a scene from the Book of Genesis. Delicate scrolls stretch across the top of the capital, terminating at the corners. Two faces of the capital are dominated by carvings of large hybrid creatures. Though abstracted, they both clearly represent a hippogryph – a winged horse with the head of an eagle. The heads of the two hippogryphs merge with one another at the corner of the capital. While their bodies are carved in low relief, their outstretched wings comprise several curved, incised lines. The two further faces of the capital play out the story of Temptation from the book of Genesis – one decorated with the Tree of Life and the other showing two nude figures flanking the same tree. The snake is coiled around the Tree of Life in both scenes, while the two figures flanking the tree stretch out one arm towards each other. While the hand of Adam is damaged, the hand of Eve holds a circular object, almost certainly the forbidden fruit from the tree.

The generic species of snake used on this capital was a common way to depict the creature before the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, at which time textual sources started describing the serpent as a *draconcopedes* – a snake with the face of a young woman. The scene on the capital exhibits an unusual amount of gendered harmony compared to what we encounter in the Gothic period as each figure is represented to have had an equal role in the Fall. Although the capital's age and general surface wear prevent us from commenting on all the details, we can clearly read both figures standing nude, their bodies represented identically, flanking the tree and stretching out one arm towards each other. The iconography of this capital is further complicated by combining the scene from the Book of Genesis with two hippogryphs. This type of occurrence, however, was not uncommon in Romanesque art and we can find a similar paradox on a capital in the nave of St. Marcellin in Chanteuges, where a large griffon randomly appears next to a scene of Marcellinus sailing with two companions to North Africa (fig. 1).

The localisation of this capital is best determined by a scientific analysis of the stone and by a stylistic comparison with other monuments. The examination of the stone determined that this is a cretaceous limestone, which probably originated in Saintes en Charente.<sup>1</sup> This localisation also corresponds to a stylistic analysis as the capital finds parallels with stone sculpture from Bordeaux and the surrounding region. Analogous examples include the massive capital with birds and fantastic creatures now in the Cleveland Museum of Art as well as the capitals in the Basilica of Saint-Seurin in Bordeaux (fig. 2 - 3). The Saint-Seurin capitals exhibit a very similar style of carving as well as comparable foliage, which consists of thick branches that curl up into large globules.

Although the context of this capital has been lost, its massive size and the continuous carving on all four faces suggest that it may have surmounted a freestanding column, possibly in a crypt.



Fig. 1  
Capital in the Nave of St. Marcellin  
France, Chanteuges  
c. 1140s

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<sup>1</sup> Stone analysis was completed by Annie Blanc in in January 2017



Fig. 2  
Engaged Capital with a Fantastic Creature and Three Birds  
Western France, Bordelais  
early 1100s  
Cleveland Museum of Art 1968.34



Fig. 3  
Porch capitals  
c. 1100  
France, Saint-Seurin Basilica in Bordeaux