



Roman 2nd century AD

A sandalled foot

33 cm

The stand-out qualities of this magnificent sandalled foot are its superbly and realistically rendered detailing, its impressive size and fine patination.

The masterful sculptor has so skilfully modelled the foot that, aside from its material, the viewer could be looking at real flesh with the skin naturalistically overlaying the toe joints and the individual toes having well-manicured cuticles and nails. The sculptor has equally convincingly conveyed the complicated crisscrossing leather sandal straps and the soft leather tied loops falling to each side, which contrast with the stiff leather of the central tongues and thickly layered sole. The detailing of the sandal's construction has been minutely observed and the viewer can admire the artist's skill in rendering the tension of the leather straps which are threaded through lunate slits on each side of the sandal and pulled over the top of the foot, with further straps threaded and pulled through the openings beneath the ankle.

Of extremely high quality and superb workmanship, the foot was once part of a monumental statue, perhaps of a wealthy and important aristocrat or, more likely, a portrait of a Roman emperor.

The sandal depicted on the present foot is an accurate re-creation in bronze of an elaborately made and sophisticated Greek leather sandal of a style which first appeared in the 5th century BC. The style was continually evolving, particularly from the 3rd century BC onwards and was subsequently adopted and made more elaborate by the Romans. The Greek version of this open sandal is echoed in the Hellenistic marble statue of Hermes by the Greek sculptor Praxiteles, found at Olympia. A version of this elaborate sandal type is also seen on the mid-4th century BC heroized ruler statue of the so-called Mausollos from Halicarnassus.

This thick-soled sandal is called a trochas (plural trochades) and the Roman more substantial version of it has a closed leather covering over the heel and sides which taper to the toes. As in the present sandalled foot, the solid leather sides had horizontal slits through which the wide strap-like laces are threaded to crisscross three times before going through large ankle loops. They are then tied in a bow at the top.

The thong between the large and second toe and tied knot of the flopping bow is covered by a leather tongue or lingula which extends from the laces down over the otherwise bare toes. The decorative

tongue on the present sandal enfolds the laces and is fixed with a central stud. This particular arrangement of overfolding tongue appears in the 3rd century BC and continues into the Roman period.

This style of overfolding tongue or lingula can be seen on this Roman ivory sandalled foot which dates to the reign of the Emperor Augustus, 31 BC - 14 AD, and may be from a statue of him. Here we have a similarly rendered naturalism of foot and footwear, though with a flatter sole and more openwork sandal than on the present bronze. Similar are the tautly pulled laced straps and flopping tied loops. On this Roman ivory, the overfolding tongue is decorated in low relief with a personification of the Nile, with scrolls in relief on the cross straps. A similar overfolding tongue with central stud is also worn by the Greek statesman Aeschines, as depicted on the 1st century AD Roman marble statue of him from the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum.

The lingula overfolding tongue became a particular characteristic of Romanized versions of Greek sandals.

Distinctive to the present bronze is the thick sole made of multiple layers with an indentation between the large and second toe. Again, this type of indented sole is distinctly Greek and was part of the developing style of the sandal from the 3rd-2nd century BC onwards. It was a style of sole which was subsequently adopted by the Romans.

Examples of tongued and indented thick-soled sandals include a circa 3rd century BC terracotta vessel in the form of a sandalled foot. They are seen on a Roman marble statue of circa 20-30 BC, worn by a young man in Greek attire from the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum.

Unlike in Greece, the dress code of Rome was regularized and used to convey messages about the social status of the wearer, including their political standing. Greek style trochades footwear is often to be seen on Roman portraits of Greek philosophers and also of Roman emperors portraying themselves in the guise of a learned Greek philosopher.

During the Roman period, Greek dress was an affectation which conveyed an outward sign of the wearers' philhellenism, affinity with Greek traditions and, above all, with Greek philosophy. The Roman historian Livy records how the Roman senators commented on the consul and military general Scipio Africanus wearing Greek attire when he was in the Greek city of Syracuse in Sicily in circa 205-204 BC - "... wearing a Greek mantle and sandals he strolled about in the gymnasium, giving his attention to books in Greek and physical exercise". (Livy, History of Rome, 29.19.12-13). Philhellenic Roman emperors like Hadrian (r. 117-138 AD), Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180 AD) and Septimius Severus (e. 193-211 AD) all chose to portray themselves as philosophers wearing the Greek mantle and trochades, rather than in military attire. Marcus Aurelius studied Greek philosophy, in particular Stoicism, and adopted the rectangular Greek mantle and sandals of a philosopher from the age of twelve, rather than the more usual semicircular Roman toga. It may well be that the present foot comes from an impressive monumental statue of one of these highly cultivated philhellenic Roman Emperors.

Provenance

Merrin Gallery, New York

Private collection, USA, acquired from the above in 1994, to 2018