EX GRAECIA:

GREEK CULTURE & THE ROMAN WORLD

Around 800 BCE, ancient Rome began as a small town in central Italy on the Tiber River. In the late fourth century BCE, the Romans initiated a policy of expansion that in 300 years made them the masters of the Mediterranean world. At its peak the Roman Empire encompassed most of continental Europe, Britain, much of western Asia, northern Africa and the Mediterranean Islands.

Impressed by the wealth, culture, and beauty of Greek cities in Greece, South Italy and Asia Minor, victorious generals returned to Rome with the spoils of war, leading to an influx of Greek art, literature, mythology and ideas into the capital. The captured artworks, which were distributed around the city in public buildings, temple precincts and private collections, led to a wider fashion, and growing market for Greek style art and sculpture in Rome.

Roman responses to Greek art was a combination of adoption, adaption, imitation, rejection and prohibition. Ancient literary sources give us some idea as to the impact this flood of Greek art had on Roman culture and aesthetic sensibilities. Many held the attitude that the arrival of Greek art in Rome marked the beginning of a slow decay of moral standards. Cato the Elder took issue with the Greek influence on Rome, stating Rome was being corrupted by “diverse vices, avarice, and luxury" and "every sort of libidinous temptation” by the statues and art which populated the city. The alternative view amongst philhellenes was that the influence of Greece helped ‘civilise’ Rome. Despite the tensions between the two sides, it became increasingly expected for educated men to have some knowledge of Greek language, culture and art, the resultant demand for artworks which evoked Greek culture and sophistication.

Roman affection for Greek art extended to the commissioning Greek or Roman artists to make copies of famous works, either from moulds of original works, or by having new pieces made in the Classical style. Had this not be the case our current understanding of ancient Greek art and sculpture would be considerably diminished due to the lack of surviving originals. Artists such as Polykleitos, Kresilas, or Alkamenes in the fifth century and Skopas, Praxiteles, or Lysippos in the fourth century are known almost exclusively from Roman copies.

The objects in this exhibition are on loan from the Koumantatakis Family collection.

HELLENIC MUSEUM

KOUMANTATAKIS FAMILY

THE CALYDONIAN BOAR HUNT

Greek myths saturated the Roman visual environment; from paintings and mosaics in houses and villas, to reliefs on sarcophagi and sculptures in both public and private spaces. Traditionally these were considered to be a reflection of the Roman fascination with Greek art works but more recent scholarship asserts that myths may have provided Roman viewers with ethical models by which they could live their lives. This is especially clear on sarcophagi, where the deeds and relationships of Greek heroes could be used to assert key Roman values such as *pietas* (duty), *virtus* (valour) and *concordia* (harmony). Sarcophagi offer genuine insight into Roman approaches to Greek myths as a device for producing meanings related to the context of death.

The story shown on this sarcophagus fragment is that of the Calydonian Boar Hunt, which was told and retold during antiquity-most famously in Ovid's Metamorphoses. When King Oeneus of Calydon failed to honour the goddess Diana (Artemis) with offerings, she released a terrifying boar on his land. The king's son, Meleager, assembled a group of renowned warriors to slay the beast, including the legendary huntress Atalanta, whose involvement in the hunt ultimately leads to Meleager's death. This may go some way to explaining why this complex myth provides the storyline for about two hundred sarcophagi still extant today, the largest group of mythological sarcophagi devoted to one hero.

DEATH OF CLYTEMNESTRA

Narrative scenes from Greek mythology were a popular theme for sarcophagi reliefs and can be subdivided into two major themes: scenes of happiness or victory, designed to positively reflect the deceased, and those of death and mourning. The latter of which is depicted here.

The myth is that of the death of Clytemnestra. The story begins with King Agamemnon of Mycanae, frustrated by poor winds as he tries to set sail for war with Troy, persuades his wife, Clytemnestra, to send their daughter Iphigenia to him. He does so under the pretence that she will marry hero Achilles, but instead the girl is sacrificed to Artemis for the sake of fair winds and success in the coming war. Betrayed, Clytemnestra takes revenge by murdering Agamemnon upon his return to Mycenae. Blood crimes were considered the most heinous of crimes in ancient Greece and demanded swift retribution, thus Clytemnestra was murdered by her son Orestes.

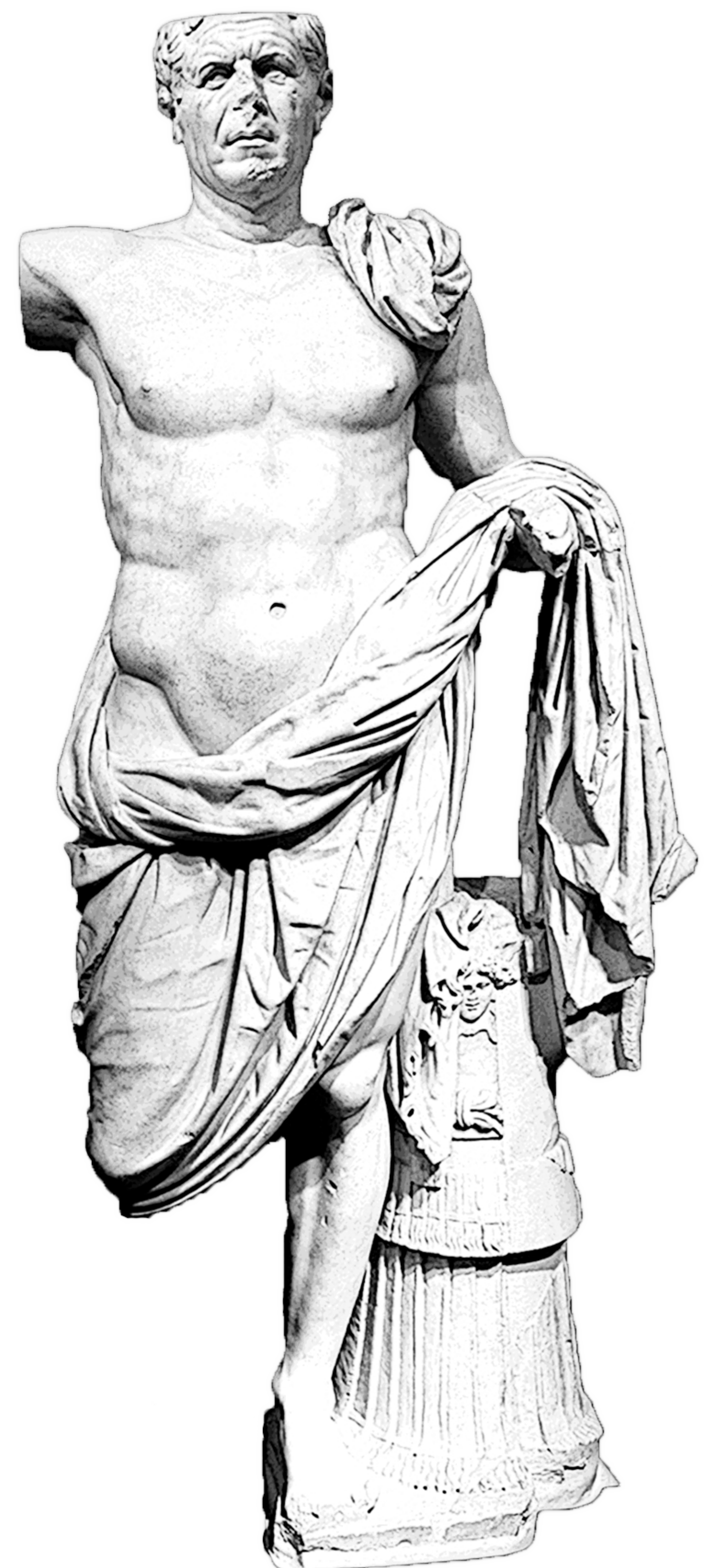
The death of Clytemnestra is depicted clearly through her prone position in the foreground, her breasts exposed, a recurring motif in ancient imagery, indicating the violent defeat of a woman. Her breasts also reflect her maternal role, emphasising the severity of the blood crime Orestes has committed. Adding an extra dimension into the narrative is the inclusion of the nursemaid with her own right breast exposed, placing her as a secondary maternal figure, having literally nursed Orestes. This underlying social criticism of Clytemnestra implies that her abandonment of motherhood and of the traditional role of a woman has somehow led to her downfall. Whether or not the deceased identified with the tale remains a mystery, but the grief and aftermath of Clytemnestra's death is striking.

THE GENERAL

Military themes and elite individuals were a prominent focus in Roman sculpture and balanced ancient Greek aesthetic traditions with Roman values and ideals. The "classicizing" trend of Imperial Rome (27 BCE - 476 CE) saw the incorporation of Hellenistic styles like idealized nude bodies, naturalist forms, and refined drapery into the repertoire of Roman art.

Depicted here is the draped lower half of a general, with his right shin and knee visible, leaning beside his *cuirass* (chest armour) which acts as a support. A similar statue from Tivoli provides a clearer image of what the original would have looked like.

The general would have been draped with a *paludamentum* (commander's cape), fastened at the shoulder with the excess material held on one arm. The contrapposto pose, with weight resting on one leg, is believed to be of Greek origin from the fifth century BCE, while the extension of the arm in the, quintessentially Roman, *adlocutio* gesture was intended to convey the authority of the individual and his ability to rally his soldiers. The partial nudity of the general further recalls the Greek tradition of 'heroic nudity' ascribed to important individuals, while the carefully positioned cloth obscures the genitals in deference to Roman modesty.



BATTLE FRIEZE

In what remains from a much larger frieze, two soldiers wearing short-cropped and belted tunics, are in the midst of a battle. One carries a shield, and the other extends his right arm as if brandishing a now-lost weapon, while Cupid (Eros) looks on from his feet. The energy of the work is emphasised by the high relief carving and the fluid drapery of the men's tunics which accentuate their musculature. The placement of the first warrior's shield, which crosses over the extended arm of the second warrior, a technique originally used by the ancient Greeks, adds depth to the composition.

Early Roman warriors carried a *clipeus* circular shield, not dissimilar to the Greek hoplite *aspis*, which was worn on the left arm and was part of the defensive armour of a soldier. The grip on the side of the shield, which allowed soldiers greater mobility, and the leather fastening running down the centre are wonderfully represented on the fragment.

Cupid's presence further heightens the martial context through his emblematic connection with power and glory, two facets of desire. Due to it being a high relief and its militaristic theme, the fragment is likely to have been displayed in public and possibly adorned the base of a victory column.

THE THRACIAN HORSEMAN

The image carved on this stele is a motif known as the Thracian Horseman, which was popular during both the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The inscription inscribed both above and below the hunt scene reads For *Jupiter Sabazius* by a soldier of the Second Praetorian Cohort, century of Mercator, whose name is *Valerius Aulusanus.*

While it is possible that the stele is dedicated to a person named *Jupiter Sabazius*, it seems more likely that the soldier *Valerius Aulusanus* commissioned and inscribed the stele as an offering to the Thracian sky god and horseman *Sabazius*. The inclusion of 'Jupiter' to his name amalgamates the figure into the Roman pantheon, similar to the syncretism of the Greeks who associated *Sabazius* with Zeus.

The Second Praetorian Cohort was an elite unit of the Roman army, responsible for protecting the emperor and Rome. *Valerius Aulusanus*, most likely a Thracian, may have been a part of the famed Praetorian cavalry, due not only to his particular choice of dedication but also because Thracians were renowned for their horsemanship and equestrian traditions.

The widespread use of Latin enabled the Thracian culture, which had no writing system of its own, to worship their gods in a new way and new format, enabling the sharing of spiritual beliefs through writing and placement in cosmopolitan places like Rome.

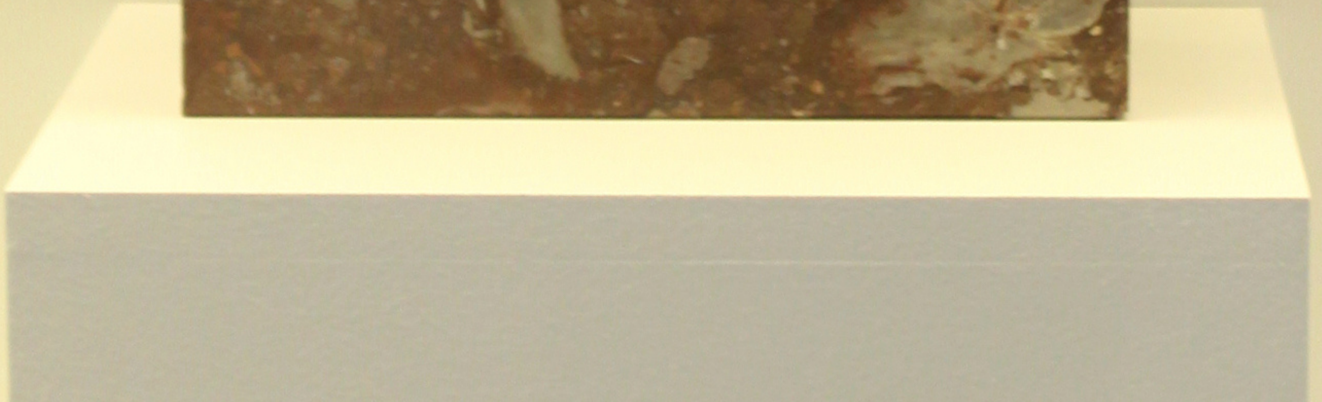
VULCAN

Vulcan was the Roman god of fire whose worship dates back to the archaic kings of Rome, making him one of the oldest, primary Roman gods. He is depicted in typical style on this relief: a middle-aged, bearded man, holding a double-headed axe in his left hand.

The relief is based on a fragment of a religious pillar called a Jupiter column, which in some cases reached up to 10 metres in height. These columns, which depicted a variety of deities and dedications for worship, were regionally specific to Roman Germania. As such they are an excellent example of the transference of religious and mythical beliefs between cultures and places.

Following the Roman victory over Greece, many ancient Greek gods were merged with the existing Roman ones, combining their characteristics. Vulcan's Greek counterpart was Hephaestus, the god of fire and patron of craftsmen and metalwork. Through him, Vulcan became identified with the production of weapons, armour and jewellery for other gods and mythological heroes. The two gods also share near-identical origin stories, although Vulcan is linked with Rome's foundation myth through one of his sons, Servius Tullius, an early Roman king.

Vulcan was also more strongly associated with the destructive nature of fire (such as wildfires, volcanoes and earthquakes) than Hephaestus. In order to avert these catastrophes, supplicants would make sacrifices to the god during the Vulcanalia festival. The Vulcanalia took place annually on August 23, at the height of summer when fires posed the greatest threat. During the festival bonfires were lit and fish and small animals were cast in as sacrificial offerings.



HADRIAN

The emperor Hadrian presided over the Roman Empire during its height, from 117 CE to 138 CE. By this time, Rome had grown into a vast cosmopolitan metropolis with over 1 million inhabitants and the empire stretched from Portugal to Iraq, northern Brittan to Sudan. The magnitude of the Roman Empire meant that it had long since ceased to be population that could be rallied under the banner of national solidarity. Instead Hadrian used Greece's cultural legacy in the Mediterranean and Rome as a unifying base which was fundamentally distinct from the alien 'other' beyond the borders of the Empire.

Hadrian embarked on a massive program of building works in Rome, Greece and other cities throughout the empire in the full knowledge of the power that monumental architecture had on the public psyche. It was an effective means of asserting his rule as well as his wider political agenda. This was in part spurred on by his personal interest in architecture. For example, poured concrete made it possible to construct buildings with vaults and domes. Hadrian was fascinated by these possibilities, and his Pantheon in Rome, with its vast dome of unreinforced concrete was the result. It was the model for the Hagia Sophia dome in Constantinople (Istanbul) and thus of domed mosques everywhere. Additionally, Hadrian's 900-room villa at Tivoli, combining the traditional and novel in equal measure, established artistic and architectural precedents of enormous influence. His wide scale building program was astoundingly successful in unifying the empire. It can be argued that he laid foundations for the great flourishing of Greek culture within the Roman world that would ultimately lead to the transformation of the Roman Empire into the Byzantine Empire.