Glyptoteket

# The Glyptotek returns Roman bronze portrait to Türkiye

## Press release 26.11. 2024



**A portrait of the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus is about to embark on a long journey. The Glyptotek has decided in favour of Türkiye's request to return the ancient bronze portrait.**

In May 2023, the Turkish ambassador contacted the Glyptotek with a request for the return of an ancient bronze portrait of the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus. The request was based on an assumption that the portrait originated from Boubon in southwest Türkiye, from which it had been illegally excavated and traded.

In August 2023, the Glyptotek initiated archival and archaeological studies and technical analyses of the portrait. The purpose was to investigate whether the portrait originates from the Boubon site in Türkiye, as previous research had assumed, and to provide a more recent scientific basis for processing the request.

It is partly this research that has been the basis for the museum's application to the Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces to return the portrait to Türkiye. The museum's recommendation to deaccession

the object is based on both earlier and new research into the provenance of the portrait. The Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces has approved the museum's recommendation. In addition, the Danish Commission on the Export of Cultural Assets has approved the museum's application for the item to be separated from the nation of Denmark.

**Research first**

Repatriating or returning museum objects is a complex task. The provenances of many archaeological artefacts held in museums are often sparsely documented or entirely unknown. Therefore, restitution cases often require thorough research to ensure that the object is returned to its country of origin. The Glyptotek's approach to restitution is to consider each case based on a wide range of legal, historical, archaeological, and ethical considerations, which must be weighed individually and assessed together.

The Glyptotek's case processing focuses on the specific item rather than on the interests of the collection or individual countries. Based on deep research into the portrait's provenance, production, and connection with similar bronze artefacts from the area, as well as the ethical aspects of the provenance, the museum wishes to accommodate the request from Türkiye.

Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen, Director of the Glyptotek, elaborates on this decision:
"Exceptionally strong arguments and scientific documentation are required to separate a work from the museum's collection. In the case of this object, both criteria were present. Unique archaeological finds from Boubon have been sold illegally to collectors and museums around the world. In recent years, many of these items, especially those held in collections in the United States, have been returned. These factors have contributed to our decision to comply with the restitution request from Türkiye.

Furthermore, the Glyptotek places high importance on the ethical aspects of restitution cases. The Danish Museum Act §33 does not apply to objects acquired before 2003; however, when (as in this case) there are convincing arguments that an object was obtained through e.g. illicit digging and illegal export, the museum considers it important to follow ICOM's museum ethical guidelines. We are pleased that the case can now be concluded. The process has taken place in constructive dialogue with the Turkish ambassador, who has shown understanding of the museum's desire to produce the research-based documentation."

Hakan Tekin, Ambassador of Türkiye to Denmark adds:
"Türkiye stands as a uniquely privileged country in terms of its cultural heritage. However, this richness, while drawing the attention of those who cherish and value this heritage, unfortunately also attracts circles involved in illegal activities. Protecting cultural heritage requires not only physical measures but also raising awareness on both national and international levels. Our country is making all efforts to this end and we are happy to observe the positive results of these efforts especially in the recent years. We see the decision of the Glyptotek to return the bronze head of Septimius Severus from Boubon, along with the terracottas from Düver to Türkiye, their rightful home, in this context. We achieved this result through a constructive dialogue with the Glyptotek.

We were confident about our arguments from the start and we are glad that we reached a common

ground at the end of this process. This development sets another precedent for institutions and collectors all over the world, including in Denmark, that all artifacts acquired with a shady provenance should be returned to their rightful owners. Acting in this direction bolsters the reputation of these institutions. Glyptotek has done the right thing and we celebrate them for their decision. We also look forward to engaging with this distinguished museum for comprehensive projects in the coming years with a view to bringing the rich cultural heritage of our lands to the attention of the Danish public."

It has been agreed with Türkiye that the Glyptotek can retain the rights to disseminate and publish the museum's studies of the bronze portrait, even after the object has been separated from the Glyptotek's collection and returned to Türkiye. The Glyptotek considers provenance research a very important discipline, and the museum wants to contribute to transparency and knowledge sharing in relation to research in this field.

**More objects on their way to Türkiye**

The Glyptotek strives to act proactively if the museum becomes aware of objects in the collection that may have been acquired in violation of the museum's acquisition policy, ICOM's museum ethical guidelines, the Danish Museum Act, or applicable UNESCO conventions regarding illegal trade in cultural property.

While researching the bronze portrait, the museum reviewed the provenance of other archaeological objects in the collection that were proven to originate from Türkiye and acquired in the 1970s.

In this connection, a group of artefacts comprising 48 architectural terracottas from the 6th century BCE from the Düver site in southwestern Türkiye came to the museum's attention. It is documented that this site was illegally excavated in the 1960s and that archaeological artefacts from this site were illicitly exported and sold on the international art market. The illicit excavation of the site of Düver was already known in the 1970s, when the museum acquired the terracottas. Owing to this problematic provenance and acquisition, the museum has therefore taken the initiative to recommend their return to Türkiye.

Both the portrait and the architectural terracottas were acquired from the art dealer Robert E. Hecht (1919–2012), who in several other cases has been linked to the illegal export and sale of cultural heritage objects from Italy and Türkiye, among other countries.

**Farewell presentation**

Before the objects are returned to Türkiye, they will be presented at the Glyptotek.

The Glyptotek's general principles for restitution and separation, as well as applicable legal and ethical guidelines, can be read here:
https://www.glyptoteket.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/principles-for-repatriation-and-restitution_ny-carlsberg-glyptotek_uk.pdf

## Facts

**FACTS about the portrait of Septimius Severus**

- The museum's acquisition protocol reads: 'Emperor Septimius Severus. Portrait. Head. Bronze: H.40 cm. Purchased by Robert Hecht for 365,500 Swiss francs. Gift from Ny Carlsberg Foundation (October 1970)'.

- At the time of acquisition in 1970, it was only known that the portrait came from Asia Minor and dates from CE 195–211.

- The Glyptotek's research confirms that the portrait probably originates from the Boubon site in southwest Türkiye.

- The portrait probably belongs to a larger group of bronze sculptures of the Roman imperial family believed to have originated from the so-called Sebasteion – a shrine to the Roman imperial cult – in Boubon.

- In the 1980s and 1990s, the Glyptotek published studies linking the portrait of Septimius Severus to a bronze body from Boubon, which was privately owned and had been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In 1979, the bronze body was loaned to the Glyptotek and exhibited together with the portrait. The purpose of this exhibition was to demonstrate and document the relationship between the head and the body. This relationship has since been questioned.

- Assumptions about the relationship between the portrait and the body, as well as the attribution to the Boubon site, prompted Türkiye's request for the portrait's return. The body in question, which was later acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, was repatriated to Türkiye in April 2023.

- The Glyptotek's researchers have not been able to examine the possible connection between the bronze portrait and the bronze body. It is therefore not possible to comment on the relationship between these two artefacts.

- In recent years, several ancient bronze sculptures have been returned to Türkiye, all attributed to the site of Boubon. They probably have a close connection to the Glyptotek's bronze portrait. These include bronzes returned from such American museums as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fordham Museum of Art, Worcester Art Museum, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, The J. Paul Getty Museum, and the Shelby White Collection.

**FACTS about the architectural terracottas from Düver**

- According to the museum's acquisition protocol, the 48 architectural terracottas were acquired as a single purchase in October 1974.

- The terracottas originate from Düver in southwest Türkiye and date from the 6th century BCE.

- The terracottas come from specific Iron Age buildings at the citadel of Düver, which was an important site in ancient times. Thus, there is scientific archaeological evidence for the provenance of the artefacts.

- Düver was illegally excavated in the 1960s. This was described in several academic articles already in the same decade. From around 1964, a large portion of the archaeological finds, mainly

architectural terracottas, spread on the international art market. This is when the Glyptotek acquired them from art dealer Robert E. Hecht in 1974.

- In Türkiye, terracottas from Düver are in the Burdur Museum and Istanbul Archaeological Museums.

For further information and press pictures:

www.glyptoteket.com/press

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