



Monk's head brass figurine

Not on display

Title/Description: Monk's head brass figurine

Object Type: Figure, Head

Materials: Bronze

Measurements: h. 54 x w. 38 x d. 23 mm

Accession Number: 386

Historic Period: late 11th - early 12th century

Production Place: Europe, Ireland

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This head or, more accurately, face cast was made from a single, hollow piece of bronze. [1] The flat back suggests that it would have been attached to a flat surface, either as a stand-alone mask or to complement a figure whose body may have been made in lower relief (inscribed, for example) or entirely two-dimensional.

The clear tonsure allows us to identify the figure as a monk. It is likely that the head would have decorated a high-status liturgical object such as a shrine, a casket or a portable altar. The material and style suggest that the object is another product of the high-quality metalwork so characteristic of early medieval Ireland. Irish provenance can be established not so much by the form resembling a Celtic mask, [2] but rather the distinctive facial features, many of which are found on Irish examples. The triangular face with pointed, deep chin has a delicately formed nose continuing into elegant brows, wide, almond-shaped and slightly downturned eyes, and a small downturned mouth.

Similar, if not identical, features can be found on the faces of the figures of St Manchan's shrine, to which this object has been previously compared. [3] The shrine of St Manchan provides good evidence about how the object would have been mounted and how it would have formed part of a high-status object. The monk could have been part of a company of monks accompanying a bishop, saints, or even Christ (on the cross or in Majesty). Only eleven out of the original fifty figures on St Manchan's shrine survive, and this shows how easily these mounted figures and heads could become detached from their original backgrounds. [4]

The tidy tonsure does not run all the way to the sides, which would suggest that the figure was viewed frontally. The top of the head has a small rectangular notch and this could be paired with a much larger notch on the left side of the face. While the latter could be interpreted as damage

(corresponding with a crack on the opposite side of the face), the notches are more likely associated with the method of mounting of the face on the flat surface of the object it once decorated. The subtlety and elegance of the modelling of the monk's face underlines the quality and splendour of its original context.

Agata Gomolka, April 2022

[1] The cavity at the back is currently filled with lead—probably a relatively modern addition.

[2] I. Finlay, *Celtic Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 61.

[3] S. Hooper (ed.), *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection* (3 vols) (Yale University Press, 1997), Vol.3. p.428 (cat. no. 365).

[4] G. Murray, 'Lost and found: The eleventh figure on St Manchan's shrine', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 133 (2003), pp. 177-181.

Further Reading

H. S. Crawford, 'A Descriptive List of Irish Shrines and Reliquaries. Part I', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Sixth ser., 13 (1923), pp. 74-93.

H. S. Crawford, 'A Descriptive List of Irish Shrines and Reliquaries. Part II', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Sixth ser., 13 (1923), pp. 151-176.

I. Finlay, *Celtic Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973).

T. Kendrick & E. Senior, 'St. Manchan's Shrine', *Archaeologia* 86 (1937), pp. 105-118.

G. Murray, 'Lost and Found: The Eleventh Figure on St Manchan's Shrine', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 133 (2003), pp. 177-181.

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1955. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
