



Head of a demon (?)

Not on display

Title/Description: Head of a demon (?)

Born: 1101 c. - 1200 c.

Measurements: h. 54 x w. 50 x d. 50 mm

Accession Number: 391

Historic Period: 12th century

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This fascinating head is carved almost in the round but was most probably never meant to be a stand-alone object. It was most likely detached from its original background—perhaps a narrative background—and possibly reused as an amulet or perhaps a gaming piece. The head was carved with plenty of attention to detail and this seems to confirm that it must have belonged to a relatively complex or elaborate sculptural form. The round head has exaggerated features for its small scale. The wide-open eyes have large drilled pupils, the fleshy nose with wide, drilled nostrils takes up almost the entire width of the face, and the mouth stretches and gapes, displaying uneven teeth created by drilling a series of holes that were squared up afterwards. Viewed from the side, the protruding lips correspond with a prominent brow ridge and cheekbones, and the enormous fleshy ears with drilled ear canals are framed by the hair running down the back of the head with a series of striations or grooves. Together, these exaggerated, carefully cut, and stylized features correspond with the representations of demons in Romanesque art.

The head may have belonged to a Romanesque historiated capital (that is a capital telling a biblical or moralising story) or perhaps even a scene as elaborate as a Last Judgement tympanum or panel. Demons in such scenes would be shown either tormenting sinners or tempting biblical figures. Famous examples with similar demonic faces abound in France, and Romanesque sculpture at Autun, Moissac, or Conques may be particularly relevant. The figures of demons on these portals possess exaggerated features that differentiate them from the saints and the elect souls, and their ugliness and bodily corruption signifies their status of the fallen and corrupt souls. The small scale of our demonic head may indicate its origin as part of a sculptural programme sporting many small scale figures, such as the one surviving at Barfreton, or as part of a cycle of capitals, similar, for example to the cycle surviving from Lewes. As part of a coherent narrative programme, this rather incongruous grotesque head would have played a role in communicating important messages to medieval audiences.

Agata Gomolka, April 2022

Further Reading

K. Ambrose, *The Marvellous and the Monstrous in the Sculpture of Twelfth-century Europe* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013)

T. E. A. Dale, 'Monsters, corporeal deformities, and phantasms in the cloister of St-Michel-de-Cuxa', *The Art Bulletin* 83 (2001), 402-436.

D. Grivot, & G. Zarnecki, *Gislebertus: Sculptor of Autun* (Clairvaux-les-Lac: Trianon, 1965).

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1957. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
