



**Head of a man**

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**Not on display****Title/Description:** Head of a man**Born:** 1125 c. - 1150 c.**Measurements:** h. 170 x w. 125 x d. 115 mm**Accession Number:** 394**Historic Period:** Early 12th century**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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This is a remarkable, if enigmatic, example of Romanesque sculpture. The head has been hacked away from its original background and it retains almost all of its neck and parts of the collar. The face is in a generally good condition, with the exception of the nose and lips, which are both chipped. The head has a very high forehead and a receding hairline that runs from the temples to the top of the skull. This forms a clear triangle, which is split in half by a light incision running from the front of the forehead to the meeting point of the two sides of the hairline at the top of the skull. This creates a very geometrical ordering of that part of the head. This ordering has at once determined the extent of its baldness and is perhaps indicative of the carver's technique, showing his or her method of organising the design. Strands of hair run down on each side, curving behind the ears and then running down towards the neck. The strands—seven on each side of the head—are carved in a thick cable pattern.

The ears of the man are large and appear fleshy, made of two thick rolls, the outer roll curving around the shorter inner roll to form volutes at the either end of the ear. The ear demarcates a break between the cable pattern of the hair and the neatly organised geometry of the beard. The sideburns are carved as a series of six groups of striations overlapping at an angle so as to create a series of triangular patterns resembling a chevron. Under this, the beard begins to flow in a series of long striations or grooves, and this is interrupted by a large triangular striated moustache running from its wide end under the nose and narrowing towards the outer edge of the face. The almost vertical but still gently curved striations of the beard on the chin terminate in the centre of the chin in a double cable pattern that gives an elegant impression of a braid.

The mouth is damaged but still shows its original width and expressive depth of the gently parted lips. The nose is similarly wide, with its large bridge terminating in a widening tip. The damage to the nose increases the impression of flared nostrils. The large eyes have drilled pupils and sharply delineated wide strips of eyelids. The prominent brow ridge is further accentuated by two deep incised grooves running above.

The head has been compared to the highly expressive and boldly carved Chichester panels. [1] Some of the features are indeed comparable, and this includes the fleshy ears, the wide and long nose, and the prominent mouth. The carvers at Chichester also used cable pattern for some of the hairstyles

and striation for beards and moustaches, though the grooves at Chichester are less finished and rounded than in the Sainsbury example. Some of the large eyes and square-profile eyelids at Chichester can also be compared to our example, but the eyes at Chichester are far from bulging, and the eyelids do not match the sharp finish of the Sainsbury head. It must be stressed, therefore, that the similarities between the Sainsbury example and the Chichester panels only relate to certain details (for example, some geometry of the hair) and even then the execution is not that similar; the overall design remains distinctive.

The angle of the neck and collar suggests that the head was protruding forward from its background, but it is difficult to establish what that background was. If the neck protruded from the figure's shoulders, they must have been heavily slumped, with the head drooping forward. This raises the possibility that the head was part of a seated figure. The flat area at the back of the head, and especially the remains of stone at the crown, may suggest that the background of the head was architectural. It has been proposed that the head may have been a label stop—a figural termination of a label or drip mould which is a common feature in Romanesque doorways. [2] The narrow lump of stone surviving at the top of the head and exactly in its centre could indeed be the remains of a roll moulding of a label. Another location on a church façade is also possible. The head may have been carved as a corbel—a feature supporting a stringcourse or parapet. In the Romanesque period these were often figural, depicting human or animal heads. The head may have also been part of a figural decorative programme of a façade, perhaps as a figure in a niche or as a dynamic figure within a narrative composition.

Another possibility is that the head may have been part of a church furnishing. Baptismal fonts incorporating human heads protruding from the bases can be found in England, the Netherlands, and elsewhere. As part of a font or other church furnishing the head may have belonged to an atlante. There are numerous examples of such Romanesque atlantes—figures with their heads thrust forward, necks extended and shoulders bent while supporting a column, a parapet, a font bowl, a sarcophagus, or a seat of a throne. One less likely possibility is that the head may have also belonged to a prophet on a doorway jamb, carrying an apostle on his shoulders or supporting a structure above, perhaps while performing his ecstatic dance.

Without knowing the original context of the head, it is impossible to ascertain the identity of the figure. The prominent receding hairline makes it unlikely to be a representation of Christ. The head may have belonged to an apostle, perhaps Saint Peter or Saint Paul. It is more likely, however, that the head represents a prophet or other 'elder'.

The head appears as an amalgam of Romanesque features, especially the cable moulding and geometrically aligned striated hair, the pleated beard, and the expressive and prominent facial features. It is difficult to pinpoint any direct comparatives but instead, a wealth of examples sporting similar features could be pointed out from contexts as diverse and distant as France, Spain, Germany, Italy, and England. In the light of the remarkably high quality of the carving, finish, and state of preservation of the Sainsbury head, one possible conclusion is that the carving is a stand-alone survivor of a tragically perished body of work of some gifted Romanesque carver.

[1] C. M. Kaufmann, *Romanesque Art c. 1050-1200 from Collections in Great Britain and Eire* (Manchester, Manchester City Art Gallery, 1959), 000, no. 59.

[2] T. A. Heslop: Personal communication (February 2022).

#### TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Scholars seem agreed on the provenance of this remarkable sculpture. It dates from the twelfth century and is almost certainly English, though with heavy influences from continental Europe, perhaps especially the Low Countries. It is possible that its origin may lie in or near Norwich, so I like to think it came home when arriving in the Sainsbury Collection.

It is known as a Head of Christ. The depth of the carving of the beard and the attention to detail means that this was a figure on which a great deal of care was lavished. It is serene and dignified yet there is something about the face which is 'not of this world'. Hence many people believe this must be the head of Jesus Christ. But the receding hairline and a beard, which suggests something more of a Roman citizen than a Galilean peasant, equally leads one to think this may be a representation of St Paul the Apostle. I am undecided about it, but I am content with such indecision. Without Jesus Christ we would never have heard of St Paul. Without St Paul the mission of Christianity to the gentile world would not be the same. Very possibly, without St Paul such a figure would never have been sculpted in the first place.

This sculpted head is astonishingly well preserved, perhaps because of an interior location in its early life. Equally well preserved is the greatest Romanesque building in Europe: Norwich Cathedral. Even the Bishop can take such architectural and spiritual heritage for granted too easily. Attending to this Head of Christ makes me aware again of just how much we have received from the devotion, imagination and craftsmanship of previous generations. It rekindles my own faith.

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Graham James, Bishop of Norwich, 1999 - 2019

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## Further Reading

W. D. Wixom, 'Medieval Sculpture at the Metropolitan 800-1400', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2005

([https://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/Medieval\\_Sculpture\\_at\\_the\\_Metropolitan\\_800\\_1400\\_The\\_Metropolitan\\_Museum\\_of\\_Art\\_Bulletin\\_v\\_62\\_no\\_4\\_Spring\\_2005](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/Medieval_Sculpture_at_the_Metropolitan_800_1400_The_Metropolitan_Museum_of_Art_Bulletin_v_62_no_4_Spring_2005))

P. Williamson, *Gothic Sculpture 1140-1300*, Yale, 1995

E. Male, (transl. D. Nussey), *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, Princeton, 1984

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## Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1956. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

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