AN ARCHAIC GREEK ANIMAL GROUP

By GISELA M. A. RICHTER
Curator of Greek and Roman Art

A lion attacking a bull is a favorite theme in oriental and in early Greek art. Two powerful animals locked in a death struggle offered a splendid opportunity to an artist interested in the portrayal of wild animals in action. And the subject lent itself admirably to various uses. It could be adapted to fill the rectangular spaces of a frieze or a base (see p. 95), the circular field of a coin or a gem (see p. 95), the diminishing space near the angle of a pediment, or—by the addition of another lion—the triangular space in the center of a pediment.

A remarkable fragment of a marble group with this subject belonging to the archaic Greek period was acquired by the Museum in recent years and is figured on the next page. Only the foreparts of lion and bull remain, and the surface is considerably battered; but even in its fragmentary state the piece shows to an amazing degree the fierce strength of the lion and the limpness of the dying bull. The lion has sprung on its prey and is biting it in the back, one forepaw on its shoulder, a hind paw on its head. The bull lies prostrate, head down, legs helplessly folded under; its dewlap is rendered by a series of wavy ridges; the horn, which was added in a separate piece, has disappeared.

On the left we must imagine the rest of the lion, which was broken off. To the right another block of marble was evidently fitted (note roughened surface with smoothed edge in the view on p. 96) containing the rest of the bull. Probably there was a second lion also, for in groups with a single lion the latter is generally biting the bull near the tail (see p. 95), or the bull is represented as still fighting, with its hindquarters erect (see p. 95)—the two animals in either case forming a compact composition. But in our group the bull is evidently lying prostrate and the lion is far over on one side, biting its victim near the neck. We may, therefore, visualize the original composition as consisting of two lions, designed symmetrically from right to left and left to right, on either side of the prostrate bull (see drawing above), as in the famous pedimental group from the Akropolis in Athens (see p. 95) and in several paintings on Greek vases.

Our marble group is not a relief in the strict sense of the term, for it has no background; but neither is it carved in the round, being flat and only roughly finished at the back. It had, moreover, a continuous plinth. The probability, therefore, is that it formed the central group of a pediment, the entire length of which may be computed to have been a little under seventeen feet (provided the top angle in the reconstructed drawing is about correct). The building to which our group belonged
Marble group of a lion attacking a bull. Greek, late 6th century B.C. The drawing by Lindsley F. Hall on the preceding page shows a probable reconstruction.
ABOVE: Lions and bull, from a limestone pediment in the Akropolis Museum, Athens. Water-color reconstruction by E. Gilliéron.
LEFT: Relief on a base from Loryma in Asia Minor. Reproduced from the “American Journal of Archaeology,” volume xviii (1914), plate iv.
RIGHT: Impression showing a design in relief from an engraved sealstone found in Gela, Sicily.
must therefore have been quite small—somewhat smaller than the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi, which had a pediment about nineteen feet long. What the two corners of the pediment contained, if anything, it is difficult to say; possibly snakes, if we may take those from the pedimental groups of the Athenian Akropolis as evidence.

The style of the modeling places our group in the late archaic period, around 500 B.C. The lion on the frieze of the Siphnian Treasury (dated before 525 B.C.) is evidently somewhat earlier, being more schematized; whereas the lions and bull from the temple of Apollo at Delphi (dated about 510 B.C.) are, to judge by the little that remains, fairly close parallels of ours—at least they show about the same degree of naturalism.

We have, therefore, in this newly acquired group a rare example of architectural Greek sculpture from a period when stylization and naturalism were happily blended. Though a mere fragment, it reveals—as is often the case in Greek sculptural pieces—the spirit of the whole, and it admirably expresses the refinement and the power of archaic Greek art.

_The greatest width of the group is 271/2 in._ (69.8 cm.), _the greatest height is 241/8 in._ (61.3 cm.); _the thickness varies from about 4 to 71/2 in._ (10.2 to 19 cm.). _The marble appears to be Parian (note the restorations in plaster at the joins of a break). The provenance is said to be Attica. For the subject of lions attacking bulls, see E. Buschor, “Burglöwen,” in Athenische Mitteilungen, vol. xxxvii (1922), pp. 92 ff._