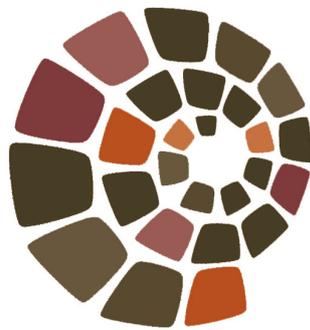


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PORTRAIT BUST FROM TARRANT RUSHTON

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# A First-century Roman Copper-alloy Portrait Bust from Tarrant Rushton

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with contributions from CIORSTAI DH HAYWARD TREVARTHEN and DEREK PITMAN

## Introduction

A small copper alloy bust of a man was recovered by John Earley in July 2011 whilst metal detecting in a field near Tarrant Rushton in Dorset (Fig. 1). The artefact was duly reported to, and recorded by, Ciorstaidh Hayward Trevarthen, the Finds Liaison Officer (FLO) for Dorset and Somerset (DOR-6E73F1). Although appearing in a brief note in the journal *Britannia* (Worrell and Pearce 2012, 382-3), as part of a larger report outlining Roman small finds reported in 2011 under the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS), the bust has not been considered in full and no attempt has, to date, been made to assess its wider significance or importance.

## Description

By Ciorstaidh Hayward Trevarthen

The artefact is a copper alloy mount in the form of a male bust measuring 27.3 mm in height, 21 mm in width at the shoulders, 14.4 mm deep and weighing 19.3 g. The detail and pose are quite naturalistic and well executed. The hair is short cropped and swept forward into a short fringe. The ears are large and project outside the hair. The eyes are oval with clearly delineated lower lids and brow line. The nose is triangular and is slightly squashed, perhaps as a

result of damage to the mould that the object was cast in. The mouth is narrow, but both lips are visible. The chin projects slightly and is rounded. The head is slightly turned to the right, being supported on a broad neck.

At the base of the neck is a small flat projection, an oval disc, with a crescent beneath it, of uncertain purpose, but possibly representing a *bulla* (an amulet worn by Roman boys, but also worn by adult males at important ceremonies) and perhaps another medallion, but, if so, the means of suspension for neither is indicated. The lower part of the chest is draped before a curving truncation. The drapery has a wavy upper edge and is formed into a curl over each of the truncated shoulders. The back is flat with a slightly uneven surface, resulting from the casting. There is a rectangular sectioned integral rivet projecting from behind the neck. The style of the bust is similar to representations of emperors on coins and in other portraiture of the first century AD. The flat back and attachment spike may indicate that the mount was originally fixed to a casket or other furniture. The object has been recorded under the Portable Antiquities Scheme as DOR-6E73F1. A very similar copper alloy Roman mount has been recorded from Hadham in Hertfordshire (BH-84F731).



Figure 1. Photographs of the Tarrant Rushton copper alloy bust: front, left profile, back, right profile (Somerset County Council)

## Composition

By Derek Pitman

Due to the intricacy of the head it was most likely the product of the lost-wax or *cire perdue* process. This involves forming a clay mould around a wax former that is later fired to remove the wax leaving a perfect negative impression of the desired model within the clay surface. This is then filled with molten bronze that, once cooled is removed from the clay mould. Qualitative analysis using portable X-ray fluorescence showed that the head is composed of a leaded tin bronze with traces of zinc, gold and antimony. The addition of lead is quite common in larger Roman statues as it lowers the melting point and improves the molten viscosity; attributes that are favourable in the lost wax process. The addition of c. 10% lead in the recipe for bronze statues was even noted by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* (Pliny *Naturalis Historia* XXXIV, XX).

## Discussion

The simple nature of the coiffure evident in the Tarrant Rushton bust, short-cut, well-defined individual strands combed forward towards a simple fringe, places it securely within a first- or early second-century AD context, hair stylings from the time of the emperor Hadrian (AD 117-138) becoming ever more ornate and complex (Kliener 1992, 238-42, 268-77). The absence of facial hair, in the form of either stubble or a full beard, is perhaps a further indicator of a first-century origin for the bust, portraits of this period being almost exclusively clean shaven, although it is more likely that this particular image was intended to represent a youth or young boy rather than a man.

The youthful nature of the bust may further be emphasised by what appears to be a medallion or *bullae* suspended just below the line of the neck. The *bullae* was a spherical locket or pouch, often containing spiritual or ancestral amulets, given to male children shortly after birth and worn around the neck in order to protect the wearer from physical or supernatural harm. Made from a variety of materials, depending upon wealth and status, *bullae* were worn in public by Roman boys until they were thought to have attained maturity, usually around the age of sixteen. Upon discard, *bullae* were usually retained for safe keeping, sometimes making a reappearance on important or ceremonial occasions. Looking at the Tarrant Rushton

bust in detail, it is difficult to see what else the 'flat projection' on the chest could realistically be, meaning that the figure as depicted here was someone who had not yet attained manhood.

The appearance of the spherical pouch or amulet, combined with the observation that the copper alloy bust had originally formed part of a decorative feature for either casket or furniture, may potentially help with regard to interpretation. It is possible, for example, that the mount originally graced a box or other container within which a specific *bullae* was stored. If this was indeed the case, the bust could plausibly be a 'generic' representation of a prepubescent first- or early second-century Roman male rather than an individual portrait of a *real* person. The discovery of a broadly similar bust, from Hadham in Hertfordshire, however, raises certain concerns with regard to such a simple explanation.

The Hadham bust (PAS ID: BH-84F731), measuring 4.3 mm in diameter, 11.6 mm in length and weighing 17.5 g, was found in 2003 with a small copper alloy figurine of Hercules (BH-A5EBE7), possibly representing part of a knife handle. As with the Tarrant Rushton bust, the portrait from Hadham has short-cropped hair combed forward to a high fringe. Facial features are all sharply defined, the face itself being slightly less rounded than the example from Dorset. A roughly circular raised disc, at the point where the neck and torso meet, is further suggestive of an amulet, medallion or *bullae*. The flattened back of the artefact, when combined with the integral rivet, suggests that, as with the Tarrant Hinton bust, the example from Hadham was originally fixed to a box or item of furniture.

Although there are subtle differences in the nature of the Hadham face, the similarity of the coiffure and overall design of both the Dorset and Hertfordshire pieces makes it clear that both were originally designed, if not by the same hand, then certainly for the same basic purpose and function. Could it be that we are seeing two separate decorative copper alloy mounts created as part of a casket associated with attaining maturity? Perhaps, although the possibility should also be entertained that the reason why both busts appear broadly similar, both possessing the same coiffure, clothing and positioning of *bullae*, is that they were originally intended to represent the *same* person. If this was so, then who could the individual have plausibly been?

Given the disparate findspots recorded for the Tarrant Rushton and Hadham busts, if both did originally represent the portrait of a real person, it is likely that the individual concerned possessed imperial associations, for it is doubtful that a private person, unless they were the son of a much celebrated official or local dignitary, would have been widely recognised. Given the nature of hair styling already noted, there are only two plausible candidates.

The severe nature of the forward combed strands is certainly reminiscent of the earlier portraits of the emperor Trajan (AD 98-117: which, if the portrait was not intended to represent that particular *princeps*, may certainly indicate manufacture during his reign). There is comparatively little variation in the way the emperor Trajan was represented, appearing as an 'ageless adult' from the time of his formal adoption by Nerva in AD 97 to his death in AD 117. Although at least six portrait types have been identified (Kleiner 1992, 208-12; Fejfer 2008, 411-16; Russell and Manley 2015, 157-60), the differences between these basic forms are extremely subtle and relate primarily to the delicate arrangement of hair across the forehead.

The primary group of replicas show the middle-aged Trajan with a clean-shaven appearance, emphasising a deeply scored nasolabial fold, the defining facial feature of his portraiture. His face was shown slightly on the fleshy side, with prominent, furrowed brows and a thin mouth. The coiffure was combed forward from the crown, with thick, comma-shaped locks arranged in an orderly fashion across the forehead, a style which appears to deliberately copy the portraiture of the earlier Julio-Claudian dynasty, especially that of Augustus (31 BC-AD 14), Tiberius (AD 14-37), Claudius (AD 41-54) and the earlier portraits of Nero (AD 54-68). The use of such a simple coiffure may have been a deliberate move on Trajan's part to disassociate himself from the distinctive stylings of the Flavian regime of Vespasian (AD 69-79) and his sons Titus (AD 79-81) and Domitian (AD 81-96), harking back to the 'golden age' of earlier, more revered emperors (Kleiner 1992, 208). Later images of Trajan reduced signs of facial ageing and, whilst the coiffure remained broadly similar, individual locks of hair were generally more fulsome and voluminous, quite unlike those depicted in the Tarrant Rushton and Hadham busts.

Despite the similarity in hair styling, of course, the Tarrant Rushton and Hadham figures possess the one

thing that portraits of Trajan do not: the *bullae*. Whilst it is not inconceivable that Trajan retained his own *bullae*, possibly even wearing it on specific ceremonial occasions, such as his formal adoption, aged forty-four, by the emperor Nerva in AD 97, there are no known images of the man that obviously depict this particular item. Given that, as a boy, Trajan himself was of no imperial significance and certainly had no association with the province of Britannia, it is highly unlikely that the two British busts represent this particular *princeps* at any point in his youth or subsequent career.

The rather severe nature of the haircut apparent in both the Tarrant Rushton and Hadham figures could, of course, simply be the product of swift and relatively crude modelling and manufacture. The fact that the coiffure in both appears to 'mimic' the style of the Julio-Claudian dynasty may be because both busts were actually manufactured in the first half of the first century AD, in emulation of a specific member of the then ruling imperial family. By the time Britain became a part of the wider Roman Empire, in AD 43, many of Julio-Claudian heirs to power had been lost to disease, accident or malicious design. When Claudius himself was raised to the position of *princeps* in AD 41, there were few other potential male successors from the family left alive to be publically acknowledged, only two more emerging during his reign: Britannicus, Claudius' own biological son from his marriage to Messalina, and Nero, later to become his adopted heir.

The imagery of Britannicus, who died in AD 55 in mysterious circumstances, is comparatively rare and poorly understood. The form and changing sequence of Nero's official portraiture, from the time of his formal adoption by Claudius in AD 50 to his suicide in AD 68, has, however, been extremely well documented, four distinctive models (classified as types I, III, IV and V) and a further probable, if briefly used, example (type II), charting Nero's development through three major hairstyles (Hiesinger 1975; Kleiner 1992: 135-9; Varner 2000: 126-30; 2004: 47-9). Each of the five main types of Neronian image identified appear to have been commissioned in order to celebrate an important event in his fourteen year reign and the years immediately preceding it, charting his rise from youthful prince to mature, and corpulent emperor. The first, Julio-Claudian coiffure, can be seen in the so-called 'Heir Apparent' (Fig. 2) and 'Accession' types, dated to AD 51-54, AD 54 and AD 55-59 respectively (Hiesinger 1975, 113-4), whilst more complex coiffures, combined



Figure 2. Coin portrait of Nero in his first coiffure type minted between AD 51 – 54 (© Trustees of the British Museum)

with increasingly fleshy features, can be observed in coin portraits commemorating his fifth and tenth anniversaries in power (AD 59 and 64: Hiesinger 1975, 119-20).

The earliest 'Adoption' portrait type in marble seems to have been produced in or just before AD 50 (Hiesinger 1975, 118). In this, Nero (then aged between 12 and 13) is portrayed as a slight individual with a

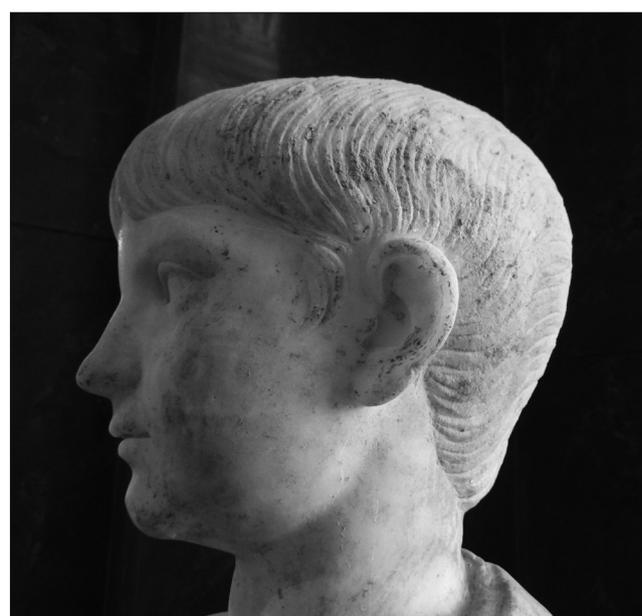
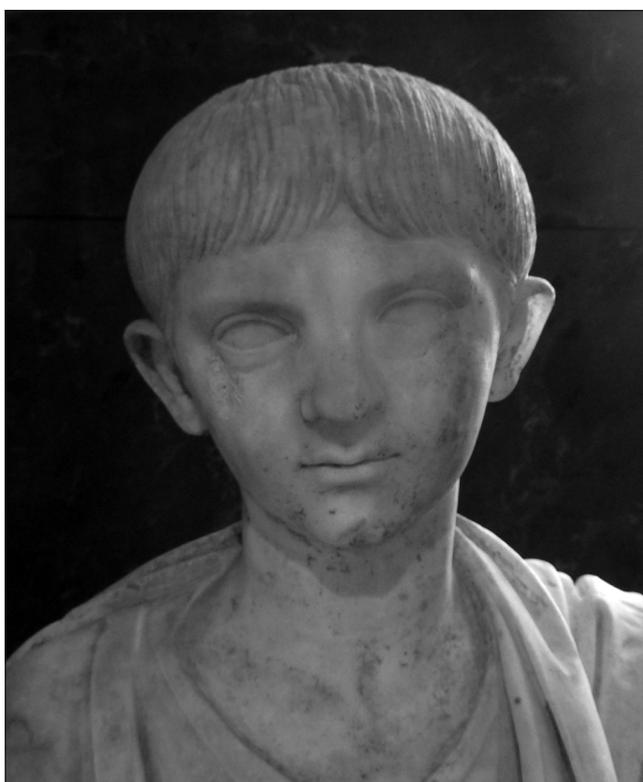


Figure 3. Portrait of the teenage Nero from his earliest 'Adoption' type preserved in the Musée du Louvre, Paris: a) front; b) left profile (Miles Russell)

delicate, centrally-parted coiffure of gently elongated, comma-shaped locks. His face is smooth and regular with a small, rounded chin, an aquiline nose, crisply defined lips and almond-shaped eyes. Away from the official coinage, four of the best known examples of the teenage Nero are preserved in the Museo Nazionale di Antichità, Parma, the Musée du Louvre, Paris (Fig. 3), the Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Cologne (Fig. 4) and the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Copenhagen (Hiesinger 1975, 118; Varner 2004, 48). These particular sculptured forms were probably created in order to commemorate the adoption of Nero by the reigning emperor Claudius, in place of Britannicus. The full-figure portraits in the Museums of Parma and Paris are set in similar postures, the toga wearing prince standing in declamatory pose with a *bulla* around his neck (Fig. 5), emphasising his youth. Portraits in marble such as these were probably swiftly distributed around the empire, helping to emphasize inarguable legitimacy of the heir apparent.

Apart from the images of the young prince that would have been circulated on official coinage, at least three sculptured versions of the 'Adoption' and 'Heir Apparent' Nero have been recorded from Britain. At Fishbourne, in West Sussex, a large fragment of Nero from his earliest portrait type, probably from the so-called 'proto Palace' (dating to the mid AD 60s) was found reused in the foundation rubble of the later 'palace proper' (Cunliffe and Fulford 1982, 24; Russell and Manley 2013a, 3.3), whilst a mutilated replica of Nero made at or shortly after his accession in AD 54



Figure 4. Portrait of the teenage Nero from his earliest 'Adoption' type preserved in the Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Cologne: a) front; b) left profile (Roger Ulrich)



Figure 5. Full togate portrait of the teenage Nero standing in declamatory pose with a bulla around his neck emphasising his youth preserved in the Musée du Louvre, Paris (Miles Russell)

has been recovered from Hinckley in Leicestershire (Huskinson 1994, 13-4; Russell and Manley 2013a, 3.2). The third image of a young Nero, this time in bronze, representing a post-accession portrait dating to the mid-50s AD, was found in the river Alde, near Saxmundham in Suffolk (Huskinson 1994, 13; Russell and Manley 2013b), whilst another likeness may be seen in a small bronze figurine of the emperor, in the guise of the god Mars, found at Coddenham in Suffolk (Huskinson 1994, 14). Although the original context and nature of the Fishbourne, Hinckley, Saxmundham and Coddenham replicas remains unknown, their presence, together with the official coinage in circulation at the time, suggests that the face of the fifth emperor was both a familiar and essential element of provincial life. Nero was the last of the Julio-Claudian dynasty to wield power and it was under his rule that imperial policy in Britain began to formalise. It is not surprising, therefore, that his portrait should have appeared so prominently within the island.

It is clear that both the Tarrant Rushton and Hadham busts, although small and rather crudely manufactured, share the same basic distinctive physiognomic characteristics and hair stylings evident in the earliest portraits of Nero, created in or around AD 50. If the two busts did represent a real person,

as seems likely, the most plausible interpretation is that the person in question was Nero, the teenage imperial heir in waiting. Possibly, in this context, both were originally part of a group of bronze mounts commemorating the imperial family, the legitimacy of power and the certainty of dynastic succession from Claudius to Nero.

Ultimately, however, Nero's reign did not go well and he was the first emperor to be officially declared an enemy of the State by the Senate. Following his suicide in AD 68, the removal, destruction and mutilation of Neronian portraiture, as a form of post mortem punishment, was actively encouraged (Varner 2004, 47). Such memory sanctions, attempting to completely cancel Nero from the collective memory of the Roman people (Varner 2004, 2), apparently extended to all parts of the empire, evidence of posthumous eradication being found upon the stone portraits of Fishbourne, Hinckley in Leicestershire and a later image, of a more corpulent Nero dating to between AD 59-64, recovered from just outside the city walls of London (Russell and Manley 2013a). The decapitated portrait of Nero in bronze recovered from the River Alde may also relate to image abuse at this time although it may more likely have resulted from violence during the Boudiccan uprising of AD 60-1 when the Roman cities of Colchester, St Albans and London were all sacked (Russell and Manley 2013b).

If the Tarrant Rushton and Hadham bronzes did originally depict the young Nero at the moment of his formal adoption by the emperor Claudius in AD 50, they would not have survived the empire-wide memory eradication of images that occurred during the reigns of Galba (AD 68-9) and Vespasian (AD 69-79: Varner 2004, 47), and may have been forcibly removed from whatever casket or box they graced. What happened to the items of furniture to which both were originally applied, or indeed to any associated busts or decorative fixtures, must unfortunately remain a mystery.

### Conclusion

The bronze bust from Tarrant Rushton, together with its 'companion' recovered from Hadham in Hertfordshire, are of an importance that exceeds their relatively small size. Following an examination of their form and design, two possible conclusions present themselves: either both formed part of a decorative element to a first-century AD box or casket associated

with the attainment of manhood and citizenship, or they were part of an imperial design, for casket or furniture, perhaps forming part of a family group of the later Julio-Claudian dynasty. If, as discussed above, the two busts were intended as likenesses of the young Nero, made just prior to his accession as emperor, they would be among the earliest representations of one of the more infamous of Roman leaders, created at a time when his true character was still masked by the innocence of youth.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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