

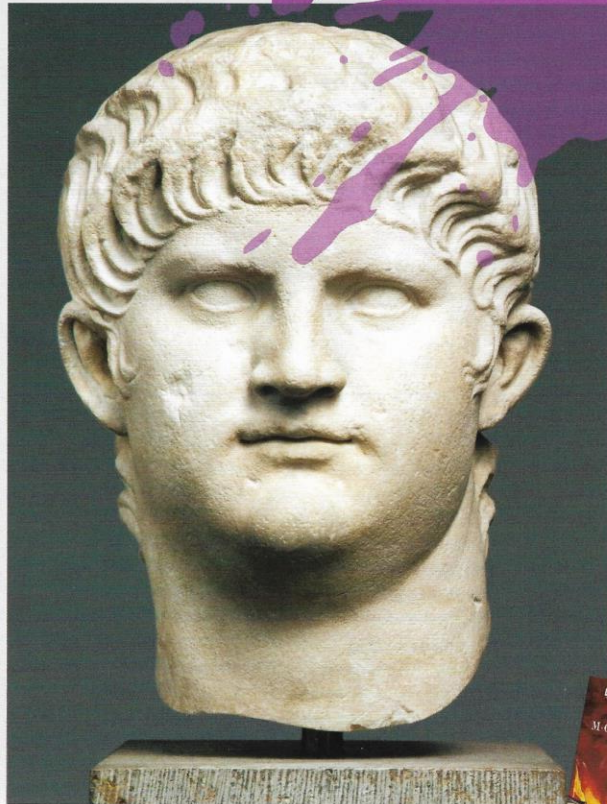
Finding Nero: toppling & defacing statues in Roman Britain

As the British Museum tells the story of Nero (ruled AD54–68), Miles Russell & Harry Manley seek out surviving traces of the notorious Roman emperor across Britain



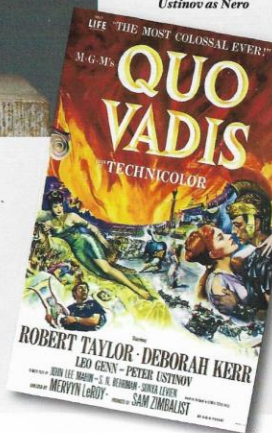
"Nero: The Man Behind the Myth" is wowing audiences with a superb range of high-quality artefacts taken from both the British Museum's archive and from international collections. Together these provide not just a snapshot of Roman life in the mid-first century AD, but also an insight into the character and mindset of the notorious fifth emperor.

Nero is, after Julius Caesar, probably the most famous of all



Above: Marble portrait of Nero from his third major portrait phase (AD59–64), from the Palazzo Ruspoli, Rome and currently in the British Museum exhibition (43cm high)

Romans: artist, tyrant, poet, murderer, actor and possible arsonist, he's a complicated character who, even after all this time, is both intriguing and difficult to like. In popular culture, he is the enthusiastic persecutor of Christians and the man who fiddled while Rome burnt. As bloated, egomaniacal monster, he appears in many works of art and in film, most memorably played by Peter Ustinov in *Quo Vadis* (1951).



Below: Movie poster for Quo Vadis (1951), starring Peter Ustinov as Nero



Above and right: Invader brought down: a statue of Christopher Columbus unveiled at the State Capitol in Saint Paul, Minnesota in 1931 was toppled in June 2020 by American Indian Movement activists

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus was a member of the notoriously complex (and famously incestuous) Julio-Claudian family: Augustus, the first emperor, being his great-great-grandfather; Tiberius, the second emperor, his great uncle; Caligula his uncle and Claudius both his great uncle and adopted father. Officially, Rome was a republic, but the Julio-Claudians ruled the empire as a hereditary monarchy, half-heartedly maintaining the fiction it was actually run by the senate and people.

The exhibition is a great reminder not only of the artistic achievements of Rome, but also of its brutality, in terms of military conquest, slavery and gladiator games. By focusing on Nero, it also provides a timely warning of the dangers of empire-building, political populism and dictatorship. Central to the show is the conflicting nature of history versus myth, the organisers keen to ask visitors to decide between different versions of the last Julio-Claudian emperor. Was he a tragic actor or a well-meaning politician doing his best? A puppet, a weak-willed mummy's boy, a bored narcissist or an utter sociopath?

Four portraits

The British Museum has pulled out all the stops for the exhibition, the opening of which was delayed from 2020, and it is great to see so many fine images of Nero, as man and boy, as he morphed from "innocent" youth to fleshy tyrant. Aside from portraits acquired from international collections, two images of Rome's first citizen recovered from British contexts appear in the show. The first, a life-size bronze head, found in 1907 by a schoolboy playing in the river Alde near Saxmundham in Suffolk, is one of the most iconic artefacts from Roman Britain. Although usually interpreted as a likeness of the emperor Claudius, it famously shares none of that emperor's distinctive features but all of Nero's, his immediate successor. Thankfully the British Museum has chosen to forgo the Claudius tag, at least for now, for an image of the fifth

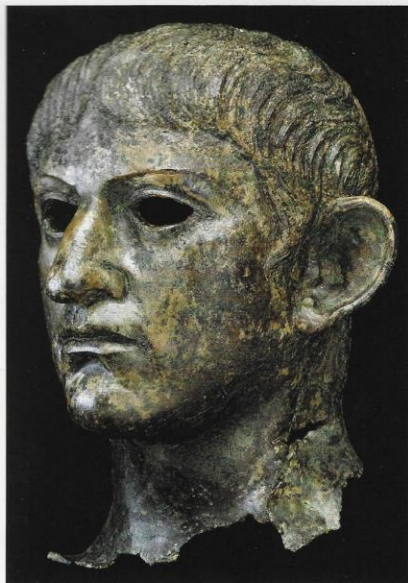
emperor, created at his accession in AD54 when aged only 17.

The Saxmundham head is undeniably affecting, with its blank eye sockets (originally filled with glass paste or enamel), aquiline nose and hair "combed" in thick, comma-shaped locks. What is, perhaps, more interesting than the image itself, however, is the evidence that surrounds its ultimate downfall. On the left side of the neck just below the ear, ten chopping punctures vividly demonstrate how the statue was toppled, knocked onto its right side and assailed with an iron axe, before the head was ripped from the shoulders. We have no idea where the statue originally stood, but, as a life-size image of the fifth emperor, it could easily have come from the temple dedicated to his adopted father, Claudius, in Roman Colchester, a town famously destroyed during the Boudican revolt of AD60/61.

Also in the show from Suffolk, is a small bronze statuette from Barking Hall, found in 1813, depicting the emperor as Mars and featuring Nero's gravity-defying quiff. At least three other portraits of Nero have been recovered from Britain, but these do not feature in the exhibition. This is a shame, as their absence takes something away from the story of this infamous leader, particularly his relationship to the people of Britannia.



Right: Locations of Britannia's four life-size Nero portraits, all of which succumbed to angry, statue-toppling mobs in the AD60s



Fishbourne

A life-size image of a young man made from Italian marble was found during excavations in the North Wing of the late first century Roman palace of Fishbourne, West Sussex in 1964. Unfortunately, only part of the face, comprising the right ear, cheek, lower nose, mouth, part of the chin and small areas of the temple and hair, survived, understandably making identity difficult to establish. Those who first examined the head wondered if it was a portrait of the original palace owner, who many believed to have been Tiberius Claudius Togidubnus, a Romanised Briton referred to on an inscription from nearby Chichester – or perhaps his son. Although an

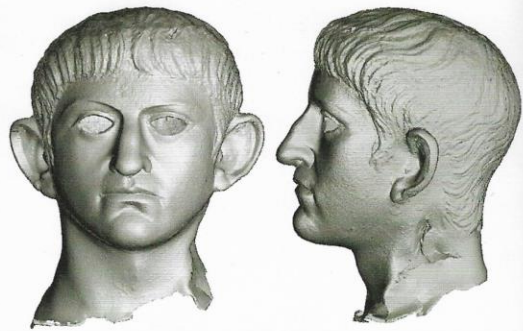
Above: Bronze head of Nero at his accession in AD54, aged 17, from the River Alde near Saxmundham, Suffolk (32cm high)

Right: The Fishbourne head, found in the foundations of the later first century palace, depicting Nero aged 13 at his formal adoption by Claudius in AD50, now in Fishbourne Roman Palace Museum

Left: A dimpled surface suggests the top of the Fishbourne head had been carved and attached separately



Right: 3D scans of the portrait showing part of a laurel wreath behind the ear, and axe blows to the forehead and chin made during the image's destruction in or after AD68



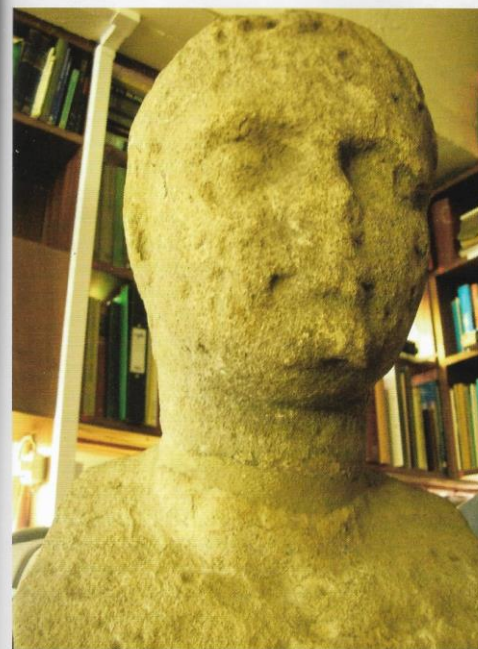
Above: 3D scans of the Nero portrait from Saxmundham, showing some of the ten chopmarks on the left side of the neck where the head was forcibly removed from its body

undeniably attractive theory, proposing this as one of the earliest portraits of a Briton yet discovered, it's worth pointing out that there's no proof Togidubnus lived at Fishbourne or that he had any descendants.

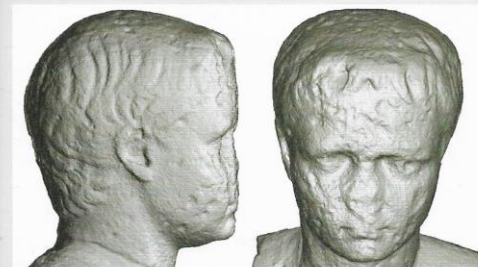
Help came with a 3D laser scan, conducted by the authors as part of Bournemouth University's The "Face" of Roman Britain project, which highlighted a number of previously unnoticed features on the portrait fragment. First, it was evident that the head had been removed from the body with some force, probably by an individual wielding an axe, a single blow fracturing the chin, further impacts detaching the forehead and fragmenting the face. We could see a small triangular protuberance of marble behind the surviving ear, which isn't part of the original coiffure. This seems to be the remains of an ornate item of head attire, almost certainly a laurel wreath, the wearing of which, by the mid first century AD, had become an imperial prerogative. The top of the head is flat, the surface dimpled with lozenge-



shaped holes. A larger hole at the centre, discoloured by rust, indicates the presence of a dowel or clamp suggesting that the top of the head had been carved separately, probably because there was a shortage of marble at the time of manufacture. Despite damage sustained, the facial attributes and hair stylings both match the earliest portrait types of Nero, created at or shortly after his formal adoption by



Above: The Hinckley Head, depicting Nero at the time of his accession in AD54, now in the Jewry Wall Museum, Leicester



3D scan of the Hinckley Nero showing some of the 62 impacts to the cheeks, nose, eyes and forehead made in or after AD68

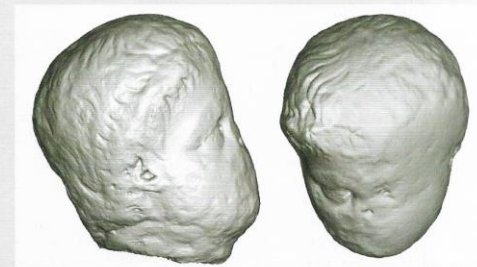
Claudius in AD50 (when he was just 13). A good comparison, created to acknowledge Nero the man as heir apparent, can be made with a statue preserved in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, which appears in the British Museum exhibition.

Hinckley

The second head from Britain, depicting a young adolescent male, is now in the Jewry Wall Museum, Leicester, having been discovered in 1930 at nearby Hinckley. This head is



Above: The London Head, depicting Nero in his third major portrait phase (AD59-64), now in the Museum of London



3D scans of the London Nero showing the emperor's highly distinctive crested coiffure

made from local oolitic limestone, and the facial features are unfortunately mutilated; yet the coiffure is distinctly Julio-Claudian, with thick, well-defined locks of hair cascading down the neck and over the ears. Hair and face establish the head as an image of Nero at the time of his accession in AD54, a good parallel for which can be found in a portrait from the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Cagliari, which also appears in the London show.

The surface of the head is badly weathered, with significant damage to

the face, at least 62 separate impact fractures being visible on the 3D scan across cheeks, nose, eyes, brow and forehead. These appear to have been caused by repeated strikes with a small hammer, chisel or blunted pick and, given the focus to the nose and eyes, it would seem this was the result of a deliberate attempt to disfigure. Similar attacks, intent on obliterating identity, have been noted in the imperial portraiture of Roman leaders consigned to post-mortem memory sanctions known as *damnatio memoriae*.



London

A third life-size head, again made from white Italian marble, was found in 1906 during development in Great Eastern Street, London, 2km north of the Roman city; it is now in the Museum of London. The head is extremely battered, having become detached from the lower neck and shoulders in antiquity. The outline of the face is broad with a fleshy chin, most of the deeply set right eye, the inner part of the left, the ears and the position of the nose, surviving. Indentations detected across the central and lower left-hand side of the face during a 3D scan suggest the damage was not entirely natural, sensory organs having been struck with a small hammer or chisel. The coiffure, where it survives, is a tiered effect of long, individual locks, lifted above the forehead into a crest.

Identification is ultimately derived from a number of factors, the most telling of which is the hairstyle, which mirrors Nero's crested coiffure in the latter years of his reign, and which features in no other portraits of the period. Parallels for this London Nero may be found in better preserved sculptures such as one in the Munich Glyptothek, now exhibited in the British Museum (see page 36).

Losing face

The images of Nero from Saxmundham, London, Hinckley and Fishbourne illustrate two critical moments in British and Roman history: the Boudican revolt and the strife that followed in the wake of the emperor's death. Throughout AD60/61, the revolt

of queen Boudica swept the eastern half of Britannia, destroying the towns of Colchester, London and St Albans. Any images of the emperor in those areas affected would undoubtedly have been overthrown. Following the collapse of the revolt, order was restored and the towns rebuilt, but a second wave of Neronian statue toppling occurred a little later, in AD68. By then Nero had fallen out with the senate and had been declared a public enemy. Following his suicide, aged only 30, attempts were made to purge him from the collective mind: his portraiture underwent memory sanctions, being hidden, defaced or carved into the likeness of another.

The decapitation strategy evident in the Saxmundham bronze, with no attempt made to damage the face, is unlike the majority of portraits affected by *damnatio* in the years after AD68, in which the eyes and nose were targeted. This, combined with the head's ultimate disposal in the River Alde, which formed the tribal boundary between the Iceni and Trinovantes – two tribes involved in the Boudican revolt – suggests the head was a trophy taken by insurgents and placed in the Alde as an offering to native gods.

With regard to the stone portraits of Nero recovered from London, Hinckley and Fishbourne, things are a little different. The London portrait, although found out of context, was a life-sized image of the fifth emperor made late in his reign (between AD59–64). As such, it is possible it was standing in London at the time Boudica

destroyed the city, in which case its overthrow could be explained. The date range for the head, however, perhaps makes it more likely that it entered the province only after the revolt, forming part of a statue commemorating the rebuilding of Londinium. An explanation for its battered state and final deposition, some distance from the town, may therefore be found in the memory sanctions that followed Nero's demise in AD68, the likeness being disfigured and discarded some way from polite society.

The Fishbourne boy can also be placed in the context of *damnatio memoriae*. Given the image represents an early likeness of Nero, it probably formed part of the "proto-palace", a Mediterranean-style house predating the main palatial building, constructed in the mid-50s AD. Evidence that the image was struck repeatedly across the face, exactly the sort of attack expected during memory sanctions, together with the observation that this part of southern Britain was unaffected by the Boudican revolt, combine to suggest the statue was probably overthrown after AD68. Deposition of the portrait fragments in the foundations of the later palace may have been thought an appropriate fate for an image of the discredited fifth emperor.

The Hinckley head, made for Nero's accession in AD54, was, like the portrait from London, found some way from the type of settlement or fort that would ultimately have commissioned it. Given it was found close to where, it has been suggested, the Roman army inflicted



defeat upon the Boudican rebels in AD61 (at Mancetter, see feature Mar/Apr 2019/165), it is possible that it represents an example of insurgent loot or trophy-taking. Perhaps more likely, given the frenzied attempt to obliterate facial identity, the portrait also relates to Neronian post-mortem memory sanctions.

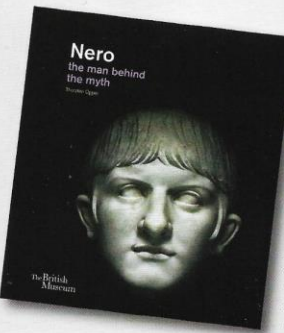
Together, the Saxmundham, London, Fishbourne and Hinckley portraits of Nero represent arguably the most important finds from Roman Britain, providing evidence not just for how the emperor wanted to be seen, but also how his image was treated and how he was ultimately perceived by citizens in the outlying provinces. The relationship between "the people" and monuments set up by politicians, landowners and governments has always been somewhat fluid. Contrary to popular belief, statues are impermanent historical markers which often become the focus for

Above: Part of a gilded stucco panel from Nero's Domus Aurea, showing sphinxes with acanthus plants; the extravagance of the palace was testimony to the empire's far reach and Nero's command of its resources

frustration and anger, especially during times of protest and social instability. When a figure falls from grace, state-sanctioned images become obvious targets, being both prominently displayed and easily accessible. The story of how and why they fall is often just as interesting as that of the individuals they commemorate. That, then, is the nature of history and, in this, Nero, fifth emperor of Rome, is no exception.

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"Nero: The Man Behind the Myth", with a catalogue by Thorsten Oppen, is at the British Museum until October 24 2021

