

A case of mistaken identity? Laser-scanning the bronze “Claudius” from near Saxmundham

Miles Russell and Harry Manley

The lifesize bronze head of a male (fig. 1) in the Weston Gallery of the British Museum is one of the most iconic artefacts of Roman Britain. Widely interpreted as a portrait of the emperor Claudius forcibly removed from a statue in or near the temple of Claudius at Colchester by British insurgents during the Boudiccan Revolt of A.D. 60/61, it has never been reported upon in detail,¹ and there has recently been some dispute as to both its identity and its significance.² In an attempt to produce an accurate record of the head whilst simultaneously addressing issues surrounding its identity, the nature of its decapitation and subsequent disposal, the artefact was subjected to a three-dimensional laser scan, the results of which are discussed here.

The head was discovered in 1907 by Arthur Godbold, a schoolboy playing in the river Alde near Rendham (Suffolk).³ Upon recovery, the piece was whitewashed and placed within a private garden⁴ before being acquired by E. R. Hollond of Benhall Lodge, Saxmundham.⁵ In December 1908, the portrait was brought before a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of London, where it received its first proper examination and identification.⁶ An article promised for *Archaeologia* never appeared, although a brief note was published in the *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and Natural History*.⁷ The first and only discussion was a summary report compiled by G. MacDonald for *JRS* some 18 years later.⁸ In 1949–50, the head was cleaned, conserved, and fully photographed by the Research Laboratory of the British Museum. In 1961, it was placed on loan to the British Museum by Mrs D. H. Hollond.⁹ Since being purchased in a Sotheby’s sale (November 29, 1965), the piece has been on display in the Romano-British collection.¹⁰

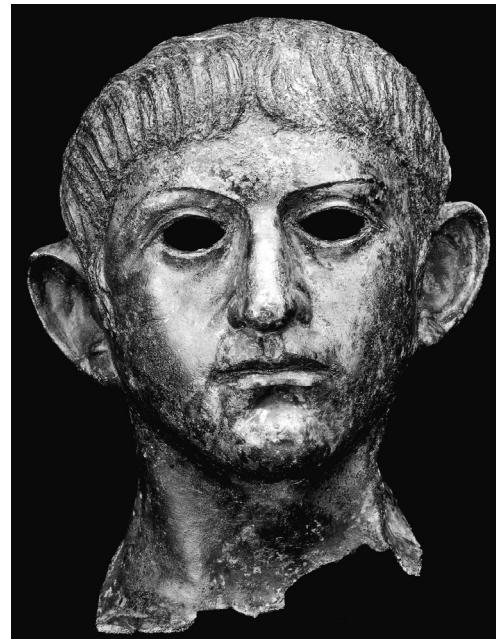


Fig. 1. The head from near Saxmundham, British Museum reg. no. 1965,1201.1 (© Trustees of the British Museum).

1 As noted by MacDonald 1926, 5–7; Toynbee 1964, 47; Hiesinger 1979, 116; and Russell 2006, 109.

2 Varner 2004, 72–73; Russell 2006, 109.

3 MacDonald 1926, 3; C. Twinch, pers. comm. 2005.

4 E. Masterton-Smith, pers. comm. 2008.

5 Toynbee 1964, 46–47.

6 MacDonald 1926, 3–4.

7 Ganz 1908.

8 MacDonald 1926.

9 Toynbee 1964, 47; Brailsford 1966, 85.

10 Inv. 1965,1201.1; see Brailsford 1966; Potter and Johns 1992, 39.