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Messalina, wife of Claudius: propaganda successes and failures of his reign

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Introduction

This article will consider the iconography used on portraits in support of failed ambitions or a lost cause. The task is often complicated by later efforts to obliterate such imagery, either by individuals acting on their own initiative or by institutionalized acts of destruction.¹ Seldom, however, was it possible for such an abolition of memory to be complete. Some objects were bound to escape destruction for any number of reasons, whether political, sentimental, practical, or purely accidental (for example, a valuable marble statue might be set aside for later recutting but then for some reason never utilized²). Others, even in mutilated condition, might retain some recognizable features. It is worth attempting to determine the original significance of mutilated portraits since someone thought they merited the effort of vandalism.³

Louvre, Dresden, and Vatican portraits of a young woman

In the Louvre and the Dresden Albertinum there exist portraits of a young woman who must at one time have enjoyed political importance.⁴ The former, the face of which is very well preserved (figs.1-4), survives as a complete statue of a veiled woman who holds a male child in her left arm and plucks at the drapery over her head with her right hand. The Dresden portrait (figs.5-6), split into 4 large fragments by some heavy blow to the middle of the head, preserves essentially the same features as the Louvre statue (with minor variations in the coiffure, see below), and endows this woman with 2 divine attributes — the turret-crown of Cybele, and a laurel wreath. Both of these attributes, and a third one, appear in a badly damaged marble head in the Museo Chiaramonti (figs.7-8), which appears to be a variant on the Louvre and Dresden type.⁵ The features and arrangement of hair along the hairline are a close match, but the rest of the coiffure (what little is visible) has been altered, probably because of the complexity of the headgear. The lady now wears an Attic helmet, surmounted by the turret-crown, and encircled by a laurel wreath. These elements are legible despite the condition of the work: the entire nose, with the middle

- 1 For a discussion of the term *damnatio memoriae* (a modern coinage), see Th. Pekáry, *Das römische Kaiserbildnis in Staat, Kult und Gesellschaft* (Part 3 of M. Wegner, ed., *Das römische Herrscherbild* [Berlin 1985]) 135 and F. Vittinghoff, *Der Staatsfeind in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Berlin 1936) 12-43, 66-74.
- 2 See Pekáry *ibid.* 136-37 on portraits that survived a *damnatio memoriae*. On the recutting of imperial statues, see *ibid.* 39-40 and J. Pollini, "Damnatio memoriae in stone: two portraits of Nero recut to Vespasian in American museums," *AJA* 88 (1984) 547-55.
- 3 See D. Freedberg, *The power of images* (Chicago 1989) 246-82, and Pekáry *ibid.* 134-35.
- 4 A. Paris, Musée du Louvre, MA 1224, marble statue, approximately life-size, pieced together from several large fragments, some restorations in body and drapery, but face essentially intact. J. J. Bernoulli, *Römische Ikonographie* 1 part 2 *Das iulisch-claudisch Kaiserhaus* (Berlin and Stuttgart 1886) 360-62; S. Sande, "Römische Frauenporträts mit Mauerkrone," *ActaAAHP* 5 (1985) 199-202, figs. 13-14; J. Charbonneau, *La sculpture grecque et romaine au Musée du Louvre* (Paris 1963) 156-57, no.1224; K. de Kersauson, *Musée du Louvre: catalogue des portraits romains* 1 (Paris 1986) 200-1, no.94.
B. Dresden Albertinum, Skulpturensammlung cat.358. Sande *ibid.* 206-8, figs.16-17; V. Poulsen, "Nero, Britannicus and others," *ActaArch* 22 (1951) 133-34, fig. 25; H. Wrede, *Consecratio in formam deorum* (Mainz 1981) 305, under no.290; R. West, *Römische Porträt-Plastik* (München 1933) 218-19, pl.59, fig. 259; De Kersauson *ibid.* 200. Condition: split into 4 fragments. Major break runs through head from upper right to lower left; left side of head and hair at nape also broken off. Front of turret-crown restored in marble; restored marble nose now removed. The well-preserved section of hair on the left side may be modern. I am indebted to Dr. I. Raumschussel for kindly facilitating my examination of this work, which is in storage.
- 5 Vatican, Museo Chiaramonti inv.1814, marble h. 0.29 m. W. Amelung, *Die Skulpturen des Vaticanischen Museums* 1 (Berlin 1903) 396, no.132. West (*ibid.*) 218. Sande (*ibid.*) 209-10, figs. 18-19. Wrede (*ibid.*) 304-5, no.290.