

The Imperial Image between Rome and the Provinces

*Genesis, Reception,
Dissemination and
Diversification*

Edited by
Dario Calomino
and Francesca Bologna



MONUMENTA GRAECA ET ROMANA

The Imperial Image between Rome and the Provinces

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Contents

Preface IX

List of Figures and Tables X

Abbreviations XXVII

1 Introduction 1

Francesca Bologna

PART 1

The Imperial Portraits: Methodology and Typology

2 The Sculptured Image of the Emperor in the Provinces:
Transfer and Adaptation 11

Dietrich Boschung

3 Facial Type as Identity? The Drusus the Elder/Caere Type at
Aphrodisias 20

Julia Lenaghan

4 Applying Facial Recognition to Roman Imperial Portraiture:
Opportunities and Challenges 27

Sam Heijnen

5 AI-Based Methods to Identify Roman Empresses and Emperors
on Coins 36

Sebastian Gampe and Karsten Tolle

PART 2

Sculpture and Coins: Relationship and Discontinuity

6 The Imperial Image on Coinage and Sculpture: What Is the
Relationship? 51

Andrew Burnett

7 Marble Sculpture vs. Coins in the Provincial Capital of Asia: a Case
Study of Geta 60

Nisan Lordoğlu and Francesca Bologna

8 Beyond the Typology? Chrono-Geography and Transmediality in
Julius Caesar's Portrait 72

Gianfranco Adornato and Federico Figura

- 9 Media-Related Approaches to Roman Imperial Portraiture, and a Case Study on Images of Togate Emperors 84
Ralf von den Hoff

PART 3

Local Transliteration of the Imperial Image: Choosing Messages Away from Rome

- 10 Notes on the Reliefs with Nero and Agrippina in the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias 113
Luigi Sperti
- 11 Observations on the Production and Circulation of Cuirassed Statues between Rome and the Provinces in the Imperial Age 121
Matteo Cadario
- 12 *Imago Optimi Principis*: New Observations on Trajan's Portraiture in the Imperial and Provincial Coinage 144
Bernhard Woytek
- 13 Preferential Treatment among Imperial Women on Roman Provincial Coinage 163
Fae Amiro
- 14 A Young Augusta in the Provinces at the Beginning of the Third Century CE: the Portrait of Publia Fulvia Plautilla on Roman Provincial Coins 174
Giorgia Cafici
- 15 Faces of Crisis: Spread and Reception of the Images of Short-Lived Emperors 187
Francesca Bologna
- 16 Reimagining the Emperor: How Provincial Mints Transformed Imperial Imagery in Bithynia and Pontus, 235–268 CE 201
Lee Ann Riccardi

PART 4**Reception, Transmission, and Invention in the Renaissance**

- 17 Searching for the Portraits of Roman Emperors through Coinage and Sculpture: Collecting, Studying, and Inventing in Verona and Veneto during the Renaissance 225
Raffaella Bucolo
- 18 Illusions of a Full Relief: Jacopo Strada's Series of Roman Emperors 242
Anna Maria Riccomini and Federico Barelllo

Conclusions

- 19 Agency, Reception, and Mediality of Roman Imperial Imagery: Concluding Remarks 257
Dario Calomino
- General Index 263

Notes on the Reliefs with Nero and Agrippina in the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias

Luigi Sperti

This paper reconsiders a well-known monument (Fig. 10.1), the relief depicting Nero crowned by his mother Agrippina the Younger from the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias.¹ It focusses on pointing out some considerations about the relief and some aspects of other artworks connected to the theme of imperial coronations, specifically a cameo in the collections of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg that has remained on the fringes of scholarly studies.

1 The Sebasteion Relief

The relief representing Nero and Agrippina was found in the early 1980s face down in one of the central rooms of the north portico, in a context that suggests a reuse as a pavement slab. The slab has been convincingly attributed to the third storey of the north portico: it is the only relief representing an imperial subject found in the north



FIGURE 10.1 Relief with Nero and Agrippina, North Building, Sebasteion complex, Aphrodisias. Excavation no. 1982-250. Marble (Courtesy of New York University Excavations at Aphrodisias. Photo: G. Petruccioli)

¹ Smith 2013: 74–79, A 1, fig. 39, pls 20–21, with previous bibliography. See also Sperti 1990: 10, fig. 29; Cadario 2004: 184–185, pl. XXV.5; Varner 2004: 73, fig. 91; Cadario 2011: 180, fig. 4; Oppen 2021: 81–82, fig. 50; Pollini 2021: 280.

portico, which is dedicated to the series of geographical personifications and *ethne*. In contrast to the reliefs with imperial subjects located in the south portico, the crowning relief shows more slender proportions, the absence of mouldings framing the imperial panels of the opposite portico, and a more defined and accurate quality. This suggests that probably also on the north side there must have been a series representing an imperial theme, and the relief with Nero and Agrippina is the only surviving evidence.

The panel depicts a dynastic crowning. Agrippina the Younger, wearing a high-belted chiton and a himation, a diadem on her head, and holding a cornucopia, is putting a laurel crown on her son's head. A cuirassed Nero once held a spear in his right hand, of which traces remain on the forearm; the horizontal position of the left forearm suggests that he once held a globe in his left hand.² At his feet, the Corinthian helmet symbolizes the military successes of the emperor; in contrast to the military iconography, Nero wears the *calcei patricii* instead of the leather boots that were common for cuirassed images.³

From the preliminary reports, it has been emphasized that the execution of the portraits is of higher quality compared to that of other panels in the Sebasteion – as, for instance, the relief reproducing Claudius, represented as a Greek hero, submitting Britannia. Agrippina's portrait is a version of the so-called Ancona type, with hair parted in the centre into two strands and three parallel, overlapping rows of curls.⁴ Nero's portrait follows the so-called Cagliari type, in minor details, but in more classicistic style.⁵

The sculptural types reproduce well-known models. Agrippina's figure, with the high-belted chiton and the himation draped around the hips, seems close to a group of statues, statuettes, and reliefs connected to the Hellenistic tradition of Nike images.⁶ In the Aphrodisias Sebasteion we find the same composition in the panel featuring a winged Victory crowning a trophy beside a heroic nude figure, usually identified as Augustus, or occasionally as Claudius.⁷ Whether winged, or without wings, this type was particularly suited for depicting female figures in crowning scenes, given the association with Nike/

Victoria's iconography. A century and a half later – and perhaps not by chance – in the frieze of the theatre's scene at Hierapolis of Phrygia, the relief depicting the crowning of the statue of Artemis Ephesia presents a very similar figure.⁸

The image of cuirassed Nero also reproduces a well-known type. The closest comparison is with the headless cuirassed statue in Istanbul (Fig. 10.2) from Tralles identified with Nero himself by the inscription on the base. The decorative composition of the cuirass (griffins facing each other, partially concealed by the *cingulum*) is typical of the early decades of the second century CE. For this reason, a chronology in the second century has been hypothesized.⁹ However, it is more probable that the statue dates back to the Neronian period, especially given its similarity to the figure of Nero in the relief from the Sebasteion.¹⁰ The two figures are very similar not only in pose and figurative scheme of the cuirass, but also in minor details such as the rendering and arrangement of the paludamentum and tunic folds, the use of *calcei patricii*, and the decoration of *pteryges*.

The use of *calcei* in cuirassed statues is uncommon. Klaus Stemmer considers this element as a characteristic of the early imperial period and provides a list of about a dozen statues, most of them dating to the Flavian age, a couple to the Augustan/Tiberian age, and a few to the second century.¹¹ As far as I know, the presence of *calcei* in cuirassed statues has not been extensively investigated. Stemmer's list is significant, but there are undoubtedly more examples, if we consider, for instance, reliefs, gems, and bronze statuettes. Nevertheless, it is remarkable the number of cuirassed images of Nero with *calcei*: apart from the Sebasteion's relief and the statue in Istanbul, we can find the *calcei patricii* in a bronze statuette in Venice depicting the emperor seated, in the typical gesture of *clementia*;¹² and in a statue from the Metroon of Olympia depicting Titus, probably reworked from a statue of Nero.¹³ The reason why some cuirassed figures wear the *calcei* is unclear. In some specific cases, the combination of military attire and *calcei* may allude at the same time to the military and civilian roles.¹⁴ In the case of Nero's

2 Smith 2013: 76.

3 For *calcei patricii* see Goette 1988: 452–457.

4 For the so-called Ancona Type see Alexandridis 2004: 158; Trillmich 2007: 48–49.

5 Smith 2013: 77; see also Pollini 2021: 273.

6 For this type see Alexandridis 2004: 250–255 (*“Hüftbauschtypus mit Gurtung”*).

7 Meyer 2000: 32–33, and Meyer 2011b: 107 (Claudius); Smith 2013: 128–129, C2, pls 46, 47 (Augustus). See also Deterling 2021: 68, fig. 7.

8 D'Andria & Ritti 1985: 146–149, pl. 38.

9 Fittschen 1970a: 549, n. 37; Stemmer 1978: 17, n. 72; Sperti 1990: 41, n. 31.

10 Cadario 2004: 186.

11 Stemmer 1978: ns 62 and 168; see also Fittschen 1970b: 183 n. 48.

12 Sperti 1990: 10.

13 Originally it was not part of the sculptural programme of the temple, but it was added at a later time. See Stemmer 1978: 33–34, III.5; Goette 1988: 453; Hitzl 1991: 85–89; Varner 2004: 73–74.

14 Fittschen 1970a: 545; Smith 1987: 129.



FIGURE 10.2 Cuirassed statue of Nero. Istanbul Archaeological Museum, inv. 506. Marble. Forschungsarchiv für Antike Plastik Köln, Neg. FA 10301 (Photo: Raoul Laev)

portraits, it is difficult to find a correlation between the use of *calcei* and the type of representation, since we can find *calcei* in different images with different functions, that is cult statues as in Olympia, allegorical scenes with dynastic implications in Aphrodisias, or more realistic scenes like the *submitio/clementia* reproduced in the Venetian bronze statuette. Furthermore, the corpus of cuirassed images of Nero is not of particular help, as many of them are extensively reworked, and the identification with Nero is often uncertain.¹⁵

As noted by Marianne Bergmann, the astral symbolism in the decoration of the *pteryges*, showing alternating rosettes and stars, is another feature in common between the Aphrodisias relief and the statue in Istanbul.¹⁶ In the cuirass of the statue, the reference to Helios/Sol is confirmed by the couple of facing griffins, associated with Apollo.¹⁷ These sculptures show the importance of solar worship during the early reign of Nero: the use of solar symbolism in cuirassed statues emphasizes the connection between the emperor and the celebration of military successes, notably those in Armenia. Both the celebration of Armenian victories, and the assimilation of the emperor to Sol, appear in the sculptural programme of the Sebasteion: the former appears on the relief depicting the emperor in heroic nudity submitting the personification of Armenia;¹⁸ the latter on a highly damaged relief with an inscription where Nero is paired with Sol, dating perhaps to the beginning of his reign.¹⁹

Obviously, the scene of the relief with Nero crowned by Agrippina cannot be interpreted just in one sense. The events surrounding Nero's ascension to the throne were evidently well-known to the patrons and to the authors of the figurative programme of the Sebasteion, leading to a political interpretation of the relief: an allegorical celebration of Agrippina's role in the young princeps's rise to power. The realistic depiction of the son is in contrast to the divine aspect of the mother: her idealized attire, diadem, and cornucopia put Agrippina into a superhuman dimension. Like Tyche, she presents herself as the guarantor of her son's military successes.

The composition also puts the scene into a unique dimension. The relief with Nero and Agrippina is the only slab from the Sebasteion showing an imperial subject that reproduces a specific monument, the cult statues of the temple of Rome and Augustus, erected in Pergamum during the early Augustan period, which was likely well-known throughout Asia Minor as it was one of the oldest and most significant temples dedicated to the imperial cult in the entire province. The temple's location remains unknown. The reverse of a cistophorus dated between 20 and 18 BCE presents it as hexastyle and Corinthian, with a five-stepped podium, a frieze bearing the dedication to Rome and Augustus, and at the centre the inscription, COM(*mune*) ASI(*ae*).²⁰ In a second version, dating slightly later, the

¹⁶ Bergmann 1998: 154.

¹⁷ See Cadario 2004: 185, 357–371.

¹⁸ Smith 2013: 140–143, C8, pls 58–59. See also Scherrer 2008: 876–877, fig. 6.

¹⁹ Reynolds 1981: 324; Meyer 2011b: 118.

²⁰ RPC I, 2217 and 2219 (RIC I², 505–506).

¹⁵ For Nero's cuirassed statues see Lo Monaco 2008; Wolsfeld 2014.



FIGURE 10.3
Cistophorus of Claudius with
Sebasteion of Pergamum on the
reverse, Ephesus (?) 41–42 CE
(AR, 27 mm). Berlin, Münz-
kabinett der Staatlichen
Museen, inv. no. 18200454:
[https://ikmk.smb.museum/
object?id=18200454](https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18200454) (Photo by
Lutz-Jürgen Lübke, Lübke und
Wiedemann). RPC I, 2730

loricated image of Augustus appears in the centre of the building. Starting from the time of Claudius and continuing through Trajan, a series of silver coins depicts between the columns a couple of figures (Fig. 10.3): Augustus, clad in cuirass and holding a spear in his right hand, is crowned by the goddess Roma, who holds an imposing cornucopia in her right hand.²¹ Pose, gesture, and attribute of dea Roma find a close parallel in the Sebasteion's Agrippina. Given the resemblance between the relief and the statue in Istanbul, it is likely that the latter is also connected to the cult statues of the Pergamene temple. How should this overt citation be interpreted? Is there some form of homage to the founder of the empire? Or is there an overlap of roles between Rome, Tyche, and Agrippina, whereby Nero reigns with the favour of the goddess?

Within the imperial celebration programme of the Sebasteion, the theme of crowning is recurrent. At least four other reliefs depict crowning scenes. One presents Aphrodite crowned by a figure in Amazonian dress, perhaps identifiable as the goddess Roma;²² in another, where Aphrodite herself crowns a cult statue, the protagonists are idealized figures, and the scene is embedded in a metahistorical dimension.²³ Elsewhere the celebration of imperial power is more explicit: in the relief featuring Claudius in *dextrarum iunctio* with Agrippina²⁴ and in the slab that shows a nude emperor with generic facial features crowning a trophy,²⁵ the figure performing the coronation is the personification of the Roman people or the Senate. In another relief conceptually similar to the previous ones, Augustus (or, according to other scholars, Claudius) leans his arm on a trophy, upon which a Nike/

Victoria places a helmet.²⁶ The theme has significant precedents in Aphrodisias: in the Tomb of Zoilos, the side A shows a double coronation of the deceased, performed by Timē and the personification of the polis. Roland Smith has noted the strong resemblance between the figure of Aphrodite crowning a cult statue and the personification of the Polis in the Tomb of Zoilos.²⁷ I suggest that the side A of Zoilos's monument could probably have had some influence on the Sebasteion scenes of a similar theme, both in the portrayal of individual characters, as in this case, and in the choice of the composition based on three figures, used in reliefs featuring Augustus/Claudius with a trophy and Nike/Victoria, Claudius with Agrippina and *genius*, and an anonymous emperor with a trophy and *genius*.

Conversely, the relief featuring Nero and Agrippina, connected to the cult group of the Sebasteion in Pergamum, is aligned with the tradition of two-figure scenes, which is the oldest. A denarius issued by Cornelius Lentulus in 12 BCE depicts Augustus (who became *pontifex maximus* in that same year) in toga paying homage to the deified Julius Caesar, putting a star on his head.²⁸ This too involves a direct (though not biological) familial relationship, where the adopted son celebrates the apotheosis of his father.²⁹ Conversely, an Augustan coin minted at Philippi, probably reproducing an existing statuary group, depicts Augustus in military dress crowned by the *divus Iulius*.³⁰ However, similar iconographic formulas, albeit with idealized figures, had long been in use: on a coin from 100 BC, the goddess Roma, standing and armed, is crowned by a *Genius populi romani* with a cornucopia, following a composition that finds some precedents in Attic relief documents from the second half of the fourth century.³¹ Case studies like the cult group of Rome and Augustus in Pergamum – and consequently, the relief in the Sebasteion – thus fit into a well-established tradition.

2 A Cameo in the Hermitage Collection

In addition to the numismatic sources, glyptic art offers interesting comparisons. In the case of the relief featuring Nero and Agrippina, the cameo reused in the Shrine of the Three Kings at the Cologne Cathedral offers a fairly evident comparison: on the right, Agrippina, bearing a cornucopia, crowns her son Nero identified as Jupiter by the

21 RPC I, 2221 (RIC I², 120). Alföldi 1970: 165, fig. 5; Fayer 1976: 109; Mellor 1981: 977–979; Price 1984: 177–178, 252, no. 19; Hänlein-Schäfer 1985: 81; Friesen 1993: 11–15, pls 1–2; Burnett 1999: 158; Koortbojian 2013: 229–233; Oppen 2021: 81.

22 Smith 2013: 154–156, C17, pls 70–71.

23 Smith 2013: 169–170, C27, pl. 86.

24 Wood 1999: 301, fig. 141; Alexandridis 2004: 158, no. 104, pl. 27.1; Ginsburg 2006: 87–88; Smith 2013: 134–138, C5, pls 52–53; Belli Pasqua 2018: 244–245, fig. 12.

25 Smith 2013: 156–158, C18, pls 72–73.

26 See n. 7.

27 Smith 2013: 170; for the Zoilos relief see Smith 1993: 36–38, no. 5, pls 15–17.

28 RIC I², 415.

29 Koortbojian 2006: 191–192, fig. 57.

30 RPC I, 1650. Koortbojian 2013: 228–230, pl. VI.3.

31 RRC, 329. Böhm 1997: 131–133, pl. 49.3.

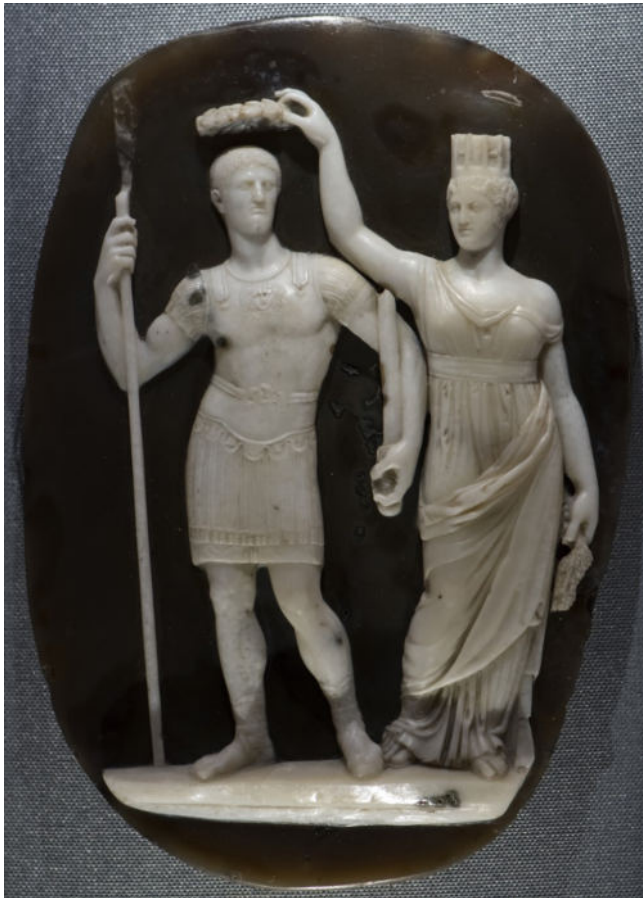


FIGURE 10.4 Cameo showing emperor crowned by Victory. Sardonyx. Hermitage, St. Petersburg, inv. XX

aegis, throne, eagle, and sceptre.³² I will not dwell on this cameo, which is well-known, except to emphasize that the figure of Agrippina presents the same type used in the Aphrodisias relief.

I would like to conclude with a cameo of unusual dimensions (18.5 cm in height) now in the collections of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, which has been almost ignored in the history of studies on imperial iconography (Fig. 10.4). A short history of previous studies help us understand why this happened. The cameo is documented in Rome in the last years of the eighteenth century when the art merchant Desalieff commissioned the Roman engraver and medalist Benedetto Pistrucci to rework the piece. It was acquired in 1805 in Paris by the Russian diplomat Kithrov and later sent to the imperial collections in St. Petersburg.³³ Scholars do not agree on the authenticity of the gem: some consider it a modern artwork; while others think it is ancient and identify the cuirassed figure with the emperor Trajan.

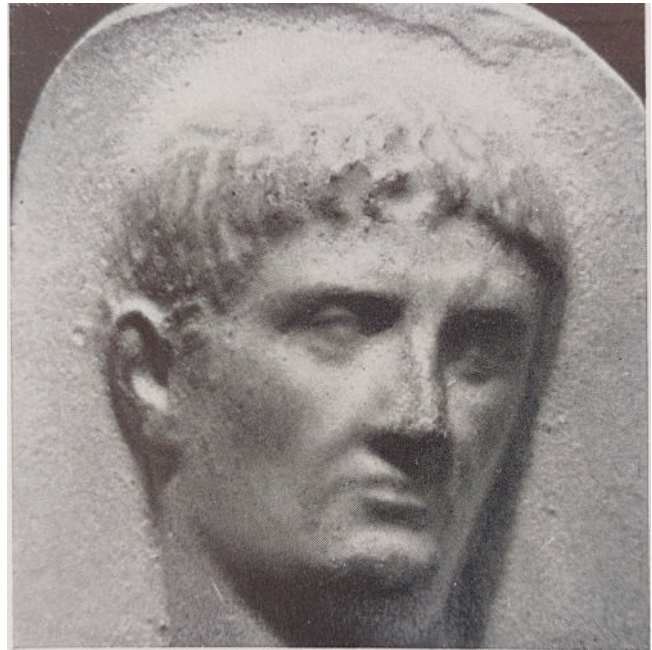


FIGURE 10.5 Detail of cameo showing emperor crowned by Victory. Sardonyx. Hermitage, St. Petersburg. From Delbrück 1933

In 1927, Maria Maximova, the curator of the Hermitage glyptic collection, published an article that included an excerpt from Pistrucci's autobiography, originally published sixty years earlier. In his autobiography, Pistrucci mentioned "... a great cameo representing the crowning of a warrior for Desalieff, which still existed in the Cabinet of the Empress of Russia"; Archibald Billing, editor of the autobiography, added that Pistrucci reworked the ancient piece in such a way that very little parts of the original gem remains.³⁴ Maximova accepted the suggestion of a radical reworking, rejecting the identification with Trajan, and proposing that the original gem should be dated to the fourth century CE. She argued that the warrior motif had parallels with some late antique medallions, particularly those from the time of Constantius II, which also depict the theme of coronation.

In 1933, Richard Delbrück published the piece, presenting a cast of the armoured figure's head (Fig. 10.5). He identified the head with Augustus, and with a somewhat acrobatic interpretation, suggested that Pistrucci had transformed the original head of Constantine into that of Augustus.³⁵ Based on this chaotic set of data, the gem was

32 Megow 1987: 213–214, A98, pl. 35.1–2; Bergmann 1998: 151–157; Gradel 2007: 23, fig. 7; Scherrer 2008: 877–878, fig. 8.

33 Neverov 1971: 95, no. 106; Neverov 1988: 138–139, no. 354.

34 Maximova 1927; see Billing 1867 (2014): 143–144.

35 Delbrück 1933: 130–131, figs 32–33; in the Catalogue of the Exhibition on Pistrucci (*Benedetto Pistrucci* 1955: 21), the corresponding entry is entitled "*Augusto incoronato da una provincia*".

treated as unreliable or insignificant in later publications on late antique imperial iconography.³⁶

The key issue here is the extent of Pistrucci's reworking. Based on the above-mentioned sources, this reworking took place between 1798 and 1800, when the engraver was between 15 and 17 years old, a rather early age for accomplishing such a challenging task. In his autobiography Pistrucci presents himself as an unappreciated talent, constantly at the centre of professional jealousy. At the age of 15, he was stabbed by a jealous colleague who was envious of his skill; later on, his role as Chief engraver at the Royal Mint of London was embroiled in fierce controversies.³⁷ It appears, as happens in other artists' autobiographies, that Pistrucci tends to overestimate his merits.

Also Wolf Megow, in his 1987 study on imperial age cameos, is sceptical about the hypothesis of a radical reworking. For technical reasons, in many details, such reworking is simply impossible. The chronology to the late antique period is also unconvincing, and Megow prefers an early dating, in the second century CE.³⁸

Here is a summary of the most important points of the question. The portrait of the armoured figure, in its general structure, could be dated to the early imperial period. The hairstyle, despite its somewhat rigid rendering, is reminiscent of portraits from the Julio-Claudian era, even though the profile, with its aquiline nose, finds no identical comparison. The cuirass, with the *cingulum* tucked under the belt to form a semicircle, recalls that of the Sebasteion relief, the statue of Tralles, and a later series of cuirassed statues of the so-called Aphrodisias type. The row of seven *pteryges* also recalls the cuirass of the relief and the statue. The gesture with which the cuirassed figure supports the sword appears somewhat unnatural. It has been assumed by some scholars that originally, instead of the sword, there was a *palladion* – in relation to Constantine's foundation of Constantinople;³⁹ but Megow has rejected the hypothesis with valuable arguments.⁴⁰ The left arm and the sword seem to be reworked, as evidenced by the fact that the blade of the sword is not aligned with the hilt. The absence of a *paludamentum* is not common, and it could result from a reworking of the left side, but it cannot be excluded that the figure was originally without it: actually,

there are some cuirassed statues without *paludamentum*, but they are scarcely represented.⁴¹

As in the relief of Aphrodisias and the statue from Tralles, the cuirassed figure wears the *calcei patricii*. The shoes are meticulously rendered with a double knot and the correct positioning of the *corrigiae*. As we saw, this type of footwear is uncommon in loricate statues and undoubtedly belongs to the original version of the gem, further evidence that it was not radically reworked, as previously claimed. Additionally, this is another indicator for dating the gem to the early imperial period.

The female figure recalls the same type as the Agrippina in the Sebasteion, except for the attributes. As in the relief at Aphrodisias, she crowns the figure beside her with a laurel wreath. Based on the available images of the gem, she appears to be an idealized figure without specific facial features. However, a more detailed image would be required for an accurate evaluation. Is she an idealized or historical figure? In this respect, an important clue comes from the attributes, the mural crown on her head and the sheaves of wheat in her left hand. The mural crown refers to Tyche/Fortuna or Cybele, and the sheaves of wheat to Demeter. The accumulation of attributes related to different deities is a characteristic of the iconography of imperial women. Images of princesses or empresses with mural crowns are mainly dated to the Julio-Claudian period. Similarly, the crown or sheaf of wheat attribute is typical of the period.⁴² I will give a few examples in the field of glyptic. A well-known cameo in Vienna, featuring Livia, shows the combination of attributes of Cybele and Ceres: the empress wears a mural crown, and holds in one hand the veiled bust of Augustus assimilated to Sol, in the other a sheaf of wheat and poppies.⁴³ The same combination of divine symbols, albeit represented in slightly different form, can be found in the so-called Claudian gem in Vienna, where the figure in the background on the left, traditionally identified as Agrippina the Younger, wears a mural crown above a *corona spicea*.⁴⁴ In the Sebasteion itself, Agrippina the Younger is depicted as Demeter in

36 See e.g. Delbrück 1933: 130–131; Bruns 1948: 28; Calza 1972: 241–242, no. 27; Cutler 1977: 10; Ott 1998: 47, 76.

37 Benedetto Pistrucci 1955: 9–11; Pirzio Biroli Stefanelli 1989: 7–12.

38 Megow 1987: 114, n. 356.

39 Bruns 1948: 28.

40 Megow 1987: 114 n. 356.

41 Stemmer 1978: 114 n. 311 (see e.g. no. XI.5, pl. 77.4); Cadario 2004: 383–384, pl. L.3–4 (Olympia, Nymphaeum of Herodes Atticus).

42 Sande 1985: 153–154, 165–170 (portraits of empresses and princesses with mural crown, in particular Agrippina); see also Alexandridis 2004: 88–89. Portraits with *corona spicea*, see Alexandridis 2004: 46–49, 55–56, 88–91; n. 431, a list of sculptures and gems (almost all representing Livia).

43 Megow 1987: 254, no. B15, pl. 9.1–3; Mikocki 1995: 165, no. 101, pl. 21; Alexandridis 2004: 137, no. 50, pl. 55.2.

44 Megow 1987: 200–201, no. 81, pls 31–32; Mikocki 1995: 182, no. 214, pl. 23; Alexandridis 2004: 166, no. 123, pl. 58.1–2. For an identification with Drusilla see Meyer 2011a: 98–100. The gem has been reworked in many details (Schmidt 2017–2018).

the relief where the empress appears in *dextrarum iunctio* with Claudius.⁴⁵ Among the assimilations of the empress with deities, the one with Demeter/Ceres is particularly common also in epigraphic and numismatic evidence.⁴⁶ An identification with Demeter/Ceres is also found in the cameo with Nero being crowned by his mother, where Agrippina's head is adorned with a laurel crown from which two ears of wheat emerge: a highly unusual but not unparalleled solution.⁴⁷

It seems to me that, notwithstanding some problematic aspects, the cameo from the Hermitage can be a valuable document for studying the tradition of crowning scenes. The portrait of the cuirassed figure and other details, such as the use of *calcei patricii* and the divine attributes of the female figure, may suggest dating the gem to the early imperial period. As we have seen, both figures are historical, but without more detailed photographic evidence, I hesitate to propose specific identifications.

In conclusion, the cult group in Pergamum, the relief at Aphrodisias, and the cameo from St. Petersburg are variations of the same composition, adapted to different historical situations. Remarkably, even a century and a half later, in the Warsaw relief with Caracalla crowned by his mother Julia Domna disguised as Victoria, the basic iconographic pattern remains the same.

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45 See bibliography in n. 23.

46 Mickoki 1995: 90–94.

47 Bergmann 1998: 152, fig. 31.4. For the identification of Agrippina with Demeter/Ceres see also Scherrer 2008: 877–878.

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