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on Ancient Bronzes

edited by Dávid Bartus, Zsolt Mráv and Melinda Szabó

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Budapest, 20–24 September 2022

Edited by
Dávid BARTUS – Zsolt MRÁV – Melinda SZABÓ

Budapest, 2024

CONTENTS

Dávid Bartus – Zsolt Mráv – Melinda Szabó	9
<hr/>	
Introduction	
Azzurra Scarci	13
<hr/>	
Fragmentation of votive offerings in the sanctuary of Olympia: First results	
Raimon Graells i Fabregat	25
<hr/>	
Some Italic Heracles from the National Archaeological Museum of Madrid: Preliminary remarks	
Federica Grossi	33
<hr/>	
Small bronzes as votive offerings from the Sanctuary of Diana in Nemi: A preliminary analysis on their context and iconography	
András Horváth-Patay	47
<hr/>	
The reconstruction of the Serpent Column in Delphi	
Uwe Peltz	53
<hr/>	
Tooth for tooth: The shining white smile of the large bronzes	
Rosemary A. Jeffreys	75
<hr/>	
Some techniques for producing copper wire in late Classical and Hellenistic Macedonia	
Seth Pevnick – Colleen Snyder	87
<hr/>	
New research on the Cleveland Apollo	
Arianna Zapelloni Pavia	113
<hr/>	
When bodies fall apart: Anatomical votives in pre-Roman Italy	
Andreas G. Vordos	139
<hr/>	
The arm of a large-scale bronze statue from Aigion, Achaëa, Greece	
Georgianna Moraitou – Makris Gerasimos – Feleris Pantelis – Kouros Georgios	149
<hr/>	
Technical examination, elemental analysis and conservation of the arm of a colossal bronze statue from Aegion at the conservation laboratories of the National Archaeological Museum at Athens	

Trinidad Nogales Basarrate	155
Primera escultura oficial en bronce en Lusitania (Hispania)	
David Ojeda	169
Roman original or deliberate fake? On an unpublished bronze head in a private collection in Cordoba	
Stephanie Stoss	179
Die Herakles-Kentauren-Gruppe. Ein Kandelaber neu beleuchtet	
Margherita Bolla	187
Bronzi figurati romani dal territorio di Mantua, Italia	
Valeria Meirano	199
The bombing of Pompeii in 1943: New evidence about the bronzes	
Francesca Morandini – Anna Patera – Annalena Brini – Stefano Casu – Svèta Gennai – Alessandro Pacini – Elisa Pucci	215
The Winged Victory of Brescia: An update on its history and origin after the study and conservation project	
Erik Risser – Kenneth Lapatin – Luigia Melillo	231
The <i>Drunken Satyr</i> from the Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum: New perspectives	
Mikhail Yu. Treister – Nikolay I. Vinokurov	247
New find of Roman military equipment of the period of the Roman–Bosporan war of 45–49 AD from the Eastern Crimea	
Sabina Veseli	259
Bronze figurines of Mercury-Thoth from Albania	
Mikhail Yu. Treister	271
Roman bronze amphoras from the Sarmatian burials of Eastern Europe	
Annemarie Kaufmann-Heinimann	307
Zum aktuellen Stand der «raetischen Statuettenwerkstatt»	
Silvia MUSTĂŢĂ – Sorin COCIŞ	333
Recycle, repair and reuse in Roman Napoca: The case of an ‘antiquarian-restorer’ from the site at Victor Deleu Street (Cluj-Napoca, Romania)	

Aura Piccioni – Roland Schwab	351
<hr/>	
Raetia resumed. Between iconography and context: An introduction	
Nicoletta Frapiccini	359
<hr/>	
Bronze casting in Late Antiquity in the Marche Region	
Norbert Franken	383
<hr/>	
Nostalgie oder Statement? Ein Essay zur Wiederkehr hellenistischer Formen an spätrömischen Bronzen	
Stephan Lehmann – Tivadar Vida	397
<hr/>	
Die „Kovacs-Vase“ – Ein archäologischer Zwischenbericht	
Alessandra Giunlia-Mair	417
<hr/>	
Lombardic ornaments from San Mauro cemetery at Cividale, Italy: Analyses and technology	



Roman original or deliberate fake?

On an unpublished bronze head in a private collection in Cordoba*

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Abstract: A private collection in Cordoba contains a previously unpublished bronze head. It is not a Roman original. Its iconographic incongruences and its intentional fractures suggest a malicious intention in its manufacture. It is possibly a fake that someone intended to introduce in the art market. A second bronze portrait of the same personage belongs to a private collection in Murcia. It has similarly never been made known. It is also a modern sculpture, confirming the non-ancient origin of the bronze in Cordoba. The joint study of the two objects can serve as a methodological example of the procedure to detect modern fakes of bronze portraits with an antique appearance.

Keywords: portrait, bronze, fake, forger

Photographs of a male portrait in bronze began to circulate among specialists in Roman sculpture in Hispania in 2015 (Fig. 1.1–6). It belongs to a private collection in Cordoba and had never been published. As soon as I learnt of the existence of the object,¹ I expressed my interest in viewing it. Thanks to the assistance of C. Márquez, I was able to perform an autopsy on it and take a new set of photographs in May 2016.

It is a portrait of a young man. The forms of the face have been indicated by smooth, taut surfaces. The only wrinkles in the face are in his brow because of the knitted eyebrows. The slightly raised corners of the mouth depict a half smile. He does not look straight to the front. The head is turned towards the left and slightly upwards. This is a well-known technical resort. In this way, the portrayed person acquires a sovereign gesture through a distancing from the observer.² Only seven of the locks of hair in his fringe were worked in detail. For the line of argument that I am going to propose, the

* This study forms part of the activities of the research project Fake. The Persistence of Deceit. Falsification of Antiquities in Rome in the 18th century (PID2020-117326GB-100). I have received a great deal of help while drafting this manuscript. C. Márquez and J. M. Noguera facilitated my access to the bronze portraits in Cordoba and Murcia. The generosity of the owners of the two portraits made it possible to perform the autopsy and photograph them. Without the suggestions of K. Fittschen and N. Franken, I would never have been able to carry out this research. Finally, the translation of the text and the acquisition of comparative photographs have been funded by the financial support of the History of Art Department at the UNED.

1 I saw the first photographs of the sculpture in January 2016. They were sent by C. Márquez, who wanted to know my opinion of it.

2 For the interpretation of this gesture, see for example ZANKER 1980, 196.

description of their form and position is fundamental. They can be divided into three groups: a) on the right of the forehead, two locks of hair have their ends pointing to the right. The outermost one is so slanted that it ends in a horizontal line; b) they are followed by three locks with the points towards the left. The first of them forms an arc with the other two, which are parallel to one another; c) two locks with their points towards the right complete the depiction of the man's fringe on the left. The last of the locks in Group b and the first in Group c make a kind of pincer with converging ends above the tear gland of his left eye. The hair on the back of the head has been lightly outlined.

Its maximum conserved height is 16.5 cm and it measures 11.5 cm from the chin to the skull.³ In the nape and in front of the left ear there are several large holes with rough edges. In the back of the head, there are two small round holes and a larger third one can be seen in the dome of the skull (Fig. 1.5). Below the crown of the head, an area displays a concentration of numerous superficial pores. As in the case of most of the hair, the ears have not been fully sculpted.

The most difficult question posed by this portrait from Cordoba is whether it is a Roman original. From the technical point of view of the manufacture of the head there is nothing that raises doubts about its authenticity. All the details mentioned in the previous paragraph can be documented in Roman portraits:

- Numerous Roman portraits are a similar size.⁴
- The large holes with rough edges that can be seen at the back and next to the left ear are the result of a fault in the casting mould. They would have occurred as a consequence of bronze walls that are too thin.⁵ This type of hole is usual in faulty Roman bronzes (*Fehlgüsse*).⁶
- The two small round holes in the back of the head were made by the distancers (*Abstandhalter*). These are metal nails that kept the right distance in the negative hollow of the casting mould after the wax centre had melted. Round distancer marks are known in some Roman bronze portraits.⁷
- The round hole in the dome of the skull is a consequence of the channel for the castings (*Einguss- und Ausflusskanal*), which was fixed to the wax model. Some examples of this type of hole are known in Roman bronze sculptures.⁸

3 For the importance of the chin-skull measurement in studies on Roman portraits: FITTSCHEN 2018, 113.

4 They are normal measurements in small-format Roman portraits: DAHMEN 2001. Not many small-format bronze portraits are known from Hispania. See for example Badajoz Archaeological Museum, Inv. 4471 (OJEDA 2018a, 209–216, Figs 1–4 and 6–9) and Mallorca Museum, Inv. 21286 (MORENO 2016, 50–52, no. 9, colour Fig. 1; OJEDA 2018b, 312). A small-format female portrait in the monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos has been linked with the city of Clunia; but unfortunately, its provenance is unknown. About that head: BERGMANN 1999, 72–73, Fig. 85.

5 For an example of this issue: KLUGE – LEHMANN-HARTLEBEN 1927, 117, Fig. 29 (the photograph is the wrong way round); VORSTER 2015, 29, 34–35, Figs 1, 12 and 14.

6 For faulty bronzes: KLUGE – LEHMANN-HARTLEBEN 1927, 110–121; GSCHWANTLER 1986, 25, no. 11, Fig. 30; LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 2001, 484. For the appearance of faulty bronzes: VORSTER 2015, 29–49. For some examples of faulty bronzes in the case of Roman portraits: LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 2001, 31–32, no. 6, 150–152, no. 90, 190–192, no. 114, 192–194, no. 115, 222–223, no. 135, 240–243, no. 148.

7 For distancers: LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 2001, 480–481. Lahusen and Formigli have repeatedly stated that round distancers are only documented in modern portraits (see for example LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 1993a, 276; LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 1993b, 179; LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 2001, 482). I have not found any arguments to support this claim empirically in any of their publications. For me it is untenable. For round distancers in Roman portraits, see for example LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 2001, 275–278, no. 172; FITTSCHEN 2004, 123.

8 For wax channels: LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 2001, 483, Fig. 16. For Roman portraits with circular holes in the skull because of wax channels, see for example LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 2001, 183–185, no. 110 (cf. 393, Fig. 110.3), 190–192, no. 114 (cf. 191, Fig. 114.4).

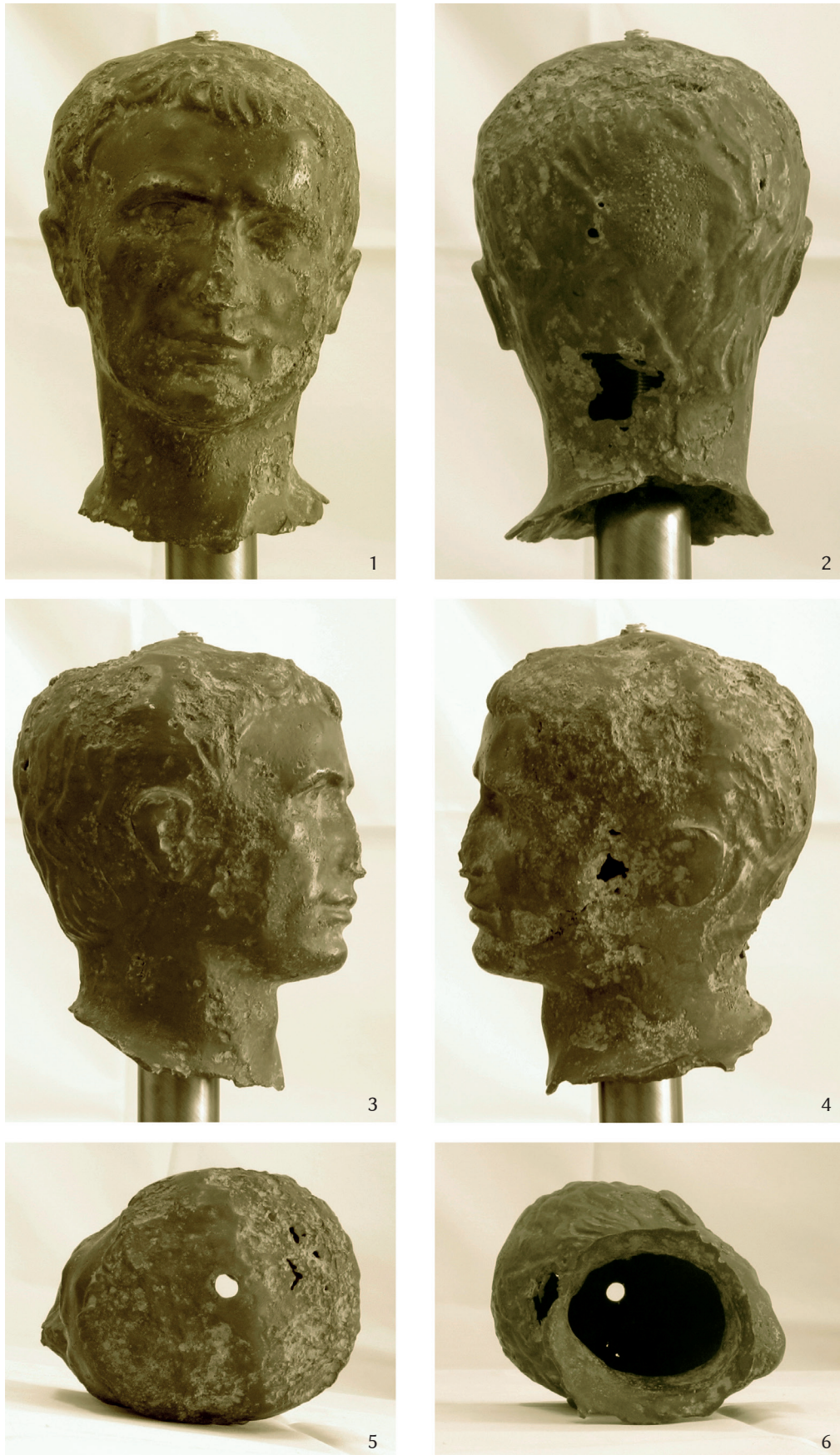


Fig. 1. 1-6 – Bronze portrait. Cordoba, private collection / © HUM 882. Archaeological Seminary (Photo: D. Ojeda).

- The countless small pores below the crown indicate that a defective alloy was used to make the head. This technical problem has been observed in Roman objects.⁹
- Most of the hair, and above all the ears, show that work on the bronze when it had cooled was not fully completed. Similar unfinished Roman portraits in bronze exist.¹⁰

Despite this, the bronze from Cordoba is not an original object of Roman age. Its iconographic incoherencies are fundamental to argue this hypothesis. The movement of the eyebrows, the wrinkled brow, the half-smile and the long horizontal lock of hair on the right side of the fringe are iconographic elements taken directly from the portraits of Julius Caesar of Type Vatican–Pisa (Fig. 2.1–4).¹¹ However, no sign of the hard features and multiple wrinkles in the portraits of the dictator can be seen. Instead, the juvenile and ideal form of the face seems to be inspired by the iconography of the emperor Augustus.¹² I have not found any exact parallels for the locks of hair at the back of the head but a very similar form and distribution can be observed on many Julio-Claudian portraits.¹³ This selection of iconographic elements suggests a modern sculptor, who sought points of reference in different Roman portraits to make a head that looks old.

A forged basalt portrait in the Metropolitan Museum in New York shows that this technique is common when modern creations are made with a malicious intention.¹⁴ In the case of the fake in New York, the sculptor mixed characteristics of the iconography of Philip the Arab with others that are typical of Julio–Claudian portraiture.¹⁵ The approach was highly successful: the object has belonged to the Museum’s collection since 1916.¹⁶ The aspirations of the sculptor of the Cordoba head may have been similar.¹⁷

The fractures in the nose and neck of the portrait underscore its creator’s deceitful intentions. Neither of them possesses sharp borders, as they are casting edges (*Gussränder*).¹⁸ They may have been made

9 For defective alloys: KLUGE – LEHMANN-HARTLEBEN 1927, 110–111. For Roman bronze portraits with similar small pores: LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 2001, 167–169, no. 100, 178–179, no. 106, 198–199, no. 118, 201–203, no. 121.

10 For cold sculpting of Roman bronzes: KLUGE – LEHMANN-HARTLEBEN 1927, 125–158; LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 2001, 487–488. For Roman portraits with unfinished cold sculpting (and with similar ears to those of the Cordoba figure), see for example LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 2001, 254, no. 156, 267–269, no. 167; DAHMEN 2001, 158, no. 40, 159, no. 45, 188, no. 167.

11 For the fundamental literature on Roman portraits of Julius Caesar: FITTSCHEN et al. 2010, 19–23, no. 12, 23–26, no. 13. For the list of replicas of the portraits of Julius Caesar of Type Vatican–Pisa: FITTSCHEN et al. 2010, 19–20.

12 See for example BOSCHUNG 1993, 141–142, no. 70, Fig. 102, 148, no. 86, Fig. 73, 164–165, no. 133, Fig. 150, 165, no. 135, Fig. 89, 176, no. 163, Fig. 81.

13 See for example BOSCHUNG 1993, 156–157, no. 112, Fig. 79, 188–189, no. 195, Fig. 72; BALTÝ – CAZES 1995, 83, Fig. 76.

14 FITTSCHEN 1977, 95.

15 FITTSCHEN 1977, 95–96, Figs 28.4, 29.2. This argument has recently been taken up by LEHMANN 2019, 31.

16 RICHTER 1954, 99.

17 I cannot say whether the intention of the forger was to create a new portrait of Julius Caesar or a late first century BC private portrait. From a methodological point of view, I prefer to follow the example of FITTSCHEN 1977, 95–96: recognize the fake, identify the models used by the forger, and not speculate about who was being represented in the forgery.

18 For casting edges and their presence on modern heads, see for example the case of the Antinous in Florence Archaeological Museum: RUMPF 1927, 241; VORSTER 2015, 29. See also the presence of this detail and its use as evidence of a modern origin in the case of a bronze head in a private collection in Wiesbaden: FITTSCHEN 1977, 94.

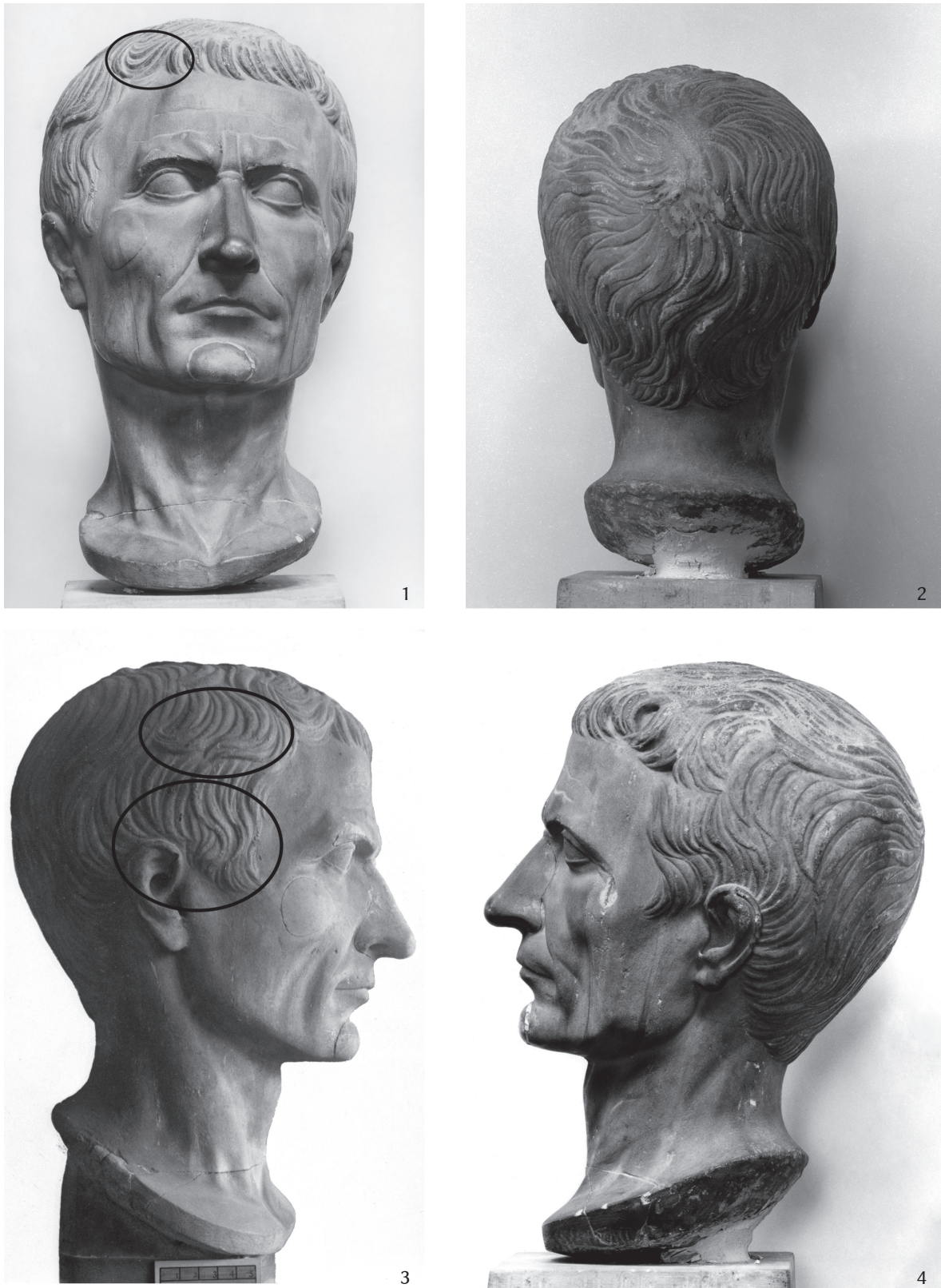


Fig. 2. 1–4 – Portrait of Julius Caesar of Type Vatican–Pisa. Pisa, Opera della Primaziale Inv. 1906.37 / © D-DAI-ROM 72.262-72.265-39.427R-72.266 (Photo: Vasari photo reproduction). The circles indicate areas that are very similar to the portrait from Murcia.

directly by the forger in the original model of the head (*Gussmodell*),¹⁹ before making the casting mould. The aim would be to deteriorate the object intentionally to simulate an archaeological discovery with an old, mutilated appearance.²⁰ To achieve this, the sculptor imitated the fractures in the necks of ancient statues and bronze busts,²¹ and also the damaged noses of many Roman portraits. In this latter detail, the forger seems to have taken the frequent breakages in marble portraits as the point of reference.²²

Another bronze head in a private collection in Murcia (Fig. 3.1–6) confirms the modern fabrication of the portrait in Cordoba and its connection with the portraits of Julius Caesar of Type Vatican–Pisa.²³ It has similarly never been published. I saw it by chance in March 2019 on an organised visit to Murcia Archaeological Museum during the 9th Meeting on Roman Sculpture in Hispania. The head was exhibited temporarily in a glass case at the entrance of the museum and has since been returned to its owner. With the assistance of J. M. Noguera, I was able to perform an autopsy on the object and take new photographs a few months later.

The bronze from Murcia lacks an archaeological context. Its maximum height is 14 cm and the distance from the chin to the skull is 11.5 cm. It is definitely a modern creation. The triangular supports in the inner part of the neck (Fig. 3.6) are unknown in Antiquity.²⁴ Additionally, there are no broken edges in the neck, and therefore the head can never have belonged to a statue or bust.²⁵

As a general rule, the more modern copies that exist of a portrait, the more unlikely it will be a Roman original.²⁶ This axiom can easily be applied to the heads in Murcia and Cordoba. They display an identical design in the form of the fringe,²⁷ repeat the distribution of the locks of hair at the back, and agree in certain details of the physiognomy of the face.²⁸ These similarities would indicate that

19 For the different models used by sculptors in bronze and the way to make them, see KLUGE – LEHMANN-HARTLEBEN 1927, 72–76.

20 It is possible that the sculptor of the Cordoba head deliberately used a defective alloy to imitate a faulty Roman bronze. For modern imitations of faulty Roman bronzes, see for example PAUL 1981, 158–159, Figs 122–123; VORSTER 2015, 34, Fig. 14.

21 For Roman heads broken off at the neck in a similar way, see for example LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 2001, 115–116, no. 60, 157–161, no. 94, 223–225, no. 136. For modern heads with the neck represented in a similar way: VORSTER 2015, 29, Fig. 1, 34, Figs 14, 16.

22 Owing to the huge number of marble heads with a similar broken nose, I will only cite a few examples, which can be seen in Volume II of the catalogues of Roman portraits in the Capitoline Museums: FITTSCHEN et al. 2010, 53–54, no. 42, Fig. 44, 54, no. 43, Fig. 46, 55, no. 45, Fig. 47, 76–77, no. 71, Fig. 83, 80, no. 75, Fig. 88. I have not found noses damaged or broken in an identical way in any bronze portraits. For some examples with a certain resemblance: BOSCHUNG 1993, 113, no. 12, Fig. 32; LAHUSEN – FORMIGLI 2001, 157–161, no. 94; DAHMEN 2001, 163, no. 60, 191, no. 178, 192, no. 183. Some similar examples can also be seen in the ideal plastic: RODRÍGUEZ 2009, 72, Fig. 57, 78, Fig. 68.

23 For the relationship between the Cordoba and Murcia portraits and the image of the dictator, see infra n. 27.

24 The triangular supports inside the neck are a centimetre long, with a round hole 2 mm in diameter in the middle.

25 For this detail in modern bronzes: FITTSCHEN 1977, 94.

26 FITTSCHEN 2006, 9–10.

27 In the case of the Murcia head, it does not only imitate the pincer in the right side of the fringe, the position of the eyebrows, the wrinkled brow and expression of the mouth in the portraits of Julius Caesar. Some of the locks of hair in the right profile are also identical to those in the portraits of Julius Caesar of Type Vatican–Pisa. Cf. Figs 2.3 and 3.3 here.

28 The coincidence in the movement of the eyebrows and the form of the mouth are especially clear. Despite this, the Murcia head resembles more closely the physiognomy of Julius Caesar's portraits than the Cordoba one. See for example the portrait of the dictator in the Vatican Museums: JOHANSEN 1967, 25–26, Fig. 1.



Fig. 3. 1-6 – Bronze portrait. Murcia, private collection / © HUM 882. Archaeological Seminary (Photo: D. Ojeda). The circle indicates an area at the back of the head that is very similar to the portrait from Cordoba.

they represent the same person.²⁹ They may have been conceived by the same modern sculptor. The exact coincidence in the chin-skull measurements is a further argument supporting this conviction.

When and where the two heads were made are difficult questions to answer. Only the portrait of Murcia offers a clue in this regard: its first owner bought it in Andalusia between 1970 and 1980. The provenance of the head from Cordoba is less reliable. Their present owners told me a story that was hard to believe: it was found in 1955 in the Roman city of Cisimbrium during farm work.³⁰ It was unearthed close to the banks of the River Anzur, beneath some tree roots, when a family relative was ploughing the land. The attempt to provide an underground provenance for the portrait, in a city of Baetica mentioned by Pliny,³¹ would have been a juicy bait for collectors in the art market. Fortunately, this time nobody was biting.

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29 The cold sculpting finishing of the Murcia head allows another aspect to be introduced regarding the choice of models for the portraits in Cordoba and Murcia. In the profiles (Fig. 3.3–4) it can be seen that the hair in the lowest part of the nape does not curl back towards the ears but falls practically vertically downwards. This is not very usual in Roman portraiture, but similar designs can be seen in some very well-known portraits. See for example the right profile of the so-called Brutus in the Palace of the Conservators (FITTSCHEN et al. 2010, 1–4, no. 1, Fig. 2, bottom left) and the left profile in some of the modern copies of the Mantua/Venice type (for this type of portrait: FITTSCHEN 1989; FITTSCHEN 1990; FITTSCHEN 2021, 36–39. An especially clear example can be seen in BOSCHUNG – VON HESBERG 2007, 104–105, no. N60, Fig. 78.2).

30 The only information I know about Cisimbrium is in MELCHOR 2007.

31 Plin. *Nat.* 3,10.

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