

Looking the Part: Transcending Gender in the Portraits of Agrippina the Younger

Kristin M. Hébert

A princess of the imperial family, Agrippina the Younger (15-59 CE) is most famous for committing incest with her deranged brother Caligula, marrying and then murdering her uncle Claudius, and being put to death by her rebellious son Nero. Agrippina's imagery, however, contrasts greatly with her overwhelmingly negative portrayal in the ancient textual sources. Her depictions offer valuable information about the roles and functions of women within the imperial dynastic ideology. Imperial women were often displayed in reliefs or in portrait groups as symbols of morality, femininity, and fecundity. While scholars have discussed this issue in great detail, they have overlooked the fact that the portrait images of these very same women may contradict the feminine virtues that they are meant to convey. For instance, portraits of Agrippina are divided into typologies based upon, among other things, the incorporation of physiognomic features of the contemporary emperors, which lend an element of androgyny to her depictions. It is likely that Agrippina, and women like her, saw that these masculine features were integrated into their portraits to reinforce their various positions in relation to the emperor, while demonstrating the unity and cohesiveness of the imperial dynasty as a whole. Furthermore, this gender transcendence was employed to advance the political aspirations of these women through the formation of alliances with popular political factions.

The sheer number of Agrippina's surviving portraits attests to the visibility she obtained during her lifetime. Five types of her portraits can be identified, although classifications vary from scholar to scholar. In addition to being set apart by their coiffure, the typologies are derived by their physiognomic resemblance to Caligula, Claudius, or Nero. They are listed here chronologically:

- The Adolphseck 22 type (also called the Providence-Schloss Fasanerie type), which is Caligulan in date, is identified by hair that is waved in concentric arcs with the addition of distinctive forehead curls. A slight resemblance to Caligula is noticeable.
- The Parma/Naples type also dates to the time of Caligula, and a similarity to the emperor has been noted here as

well. It is because of this similarity that some believe this type is actually Claudian in date, and served as a solution for re-carving portraits of Claudius' former wife, Messalina.¹ Predominant scholarly opinion holds that they were likely created at the beginning of Claudius and Agrippina's marriage from her older, Caligulan-era portraits.

- The Copenhagen/Ancona type is the most influential and widespread of the five types. It is of Claudian date and is often recognized by hair that is parted in the middle and rises in tiers of curls over the temples. Typically, the curls are drilled. The back of the hair is tied, and long corkscrew curls fall from behind each ear. The type sometimes includes a diadem. The lips are tightly set, and the upper lip protrudes slightly over the lower. The cheekbones jut out, the chin is broad, the eyes are large, and the nose is prominent with a rounded tip. Scholars have noted a somewhat masculine cast to the face, which suggests an assimilation to Claudius.²
- The Milan/Florence type is also Claudian in date. It is similar to the Copenhagen/Ancona type but tends to be less ornamental. It is distinguished mainly by a number of small curls on the forehead.
- The Stuttgart type is of Neronian date and shows a slight increase in age. Many of this type show a crescent diadem, and the hair is typically displayed in rows of curls that start immediately at the center parting. The facial features are softer and fleshier, stressing a resemblance to Nero.

Many scholars note that this resemblance is the result of unconscious carving on the part of the portrait copyists; however, it is more likely a calculated maneuver developed by both the patron and the official portrait artists. The reasoning behind this may be explained by investigating the copying process, which must not be overlooked. The official portrait was usually copied in bronze miniatures, which were distributed to individual workshops, where they would

¹ Susan Wood, *Imperial Women: A Study in Public Images, 40 B.C.-A.D. 68* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 296.

² Anthony Barrett, *Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 216.

then be pointed up and copied accordingly.³ These imperial portrait models were highly elaborate and would have displayed advanced levels of skill. It is likely that copyists were not always able to reproduce all of the subtle nuances and details in effect. Therefore, the copied pieces vary in degrees according to the copyist's ability and ingenuity, while the end result still remains recognizable.⁴ When analyzing these portraits, it is imperative to remember that, while the basic facial structure of the model is present in all portrait types, minor details were often altered as new types were introduced.⁵ In addition, variances are unavoidable when multiple artists and workshops copy numerous pieces. Still, it is unlikely that the masculine attributes that appear in Agrippina's portraiture are a result of the copying process, since each individual typology, and not each individual portrait, resembles a male. Further, this assimilation cannot be accidental because it appears in the highest quality portraits of each type, indicating that the transference of traits began in the modeling stage, and not in the copying stage.⁶

Agrippina was related, closely, to all of these men, and so it is only logical that they would share physiognomic characteristics. Since everyone's appearance changes with age, it is again only logical for Agrippina's four portrait types to vary; but this is thinking too simplistically. Students of Roman art have, for a long time, understood that visual likeness is only one of the many elements that a portrait encompasses. Concepts of spiritual likeness, the representation of ideals, or fictive assimilations may account for just as much as visual resemblance. There is no doubt that Roman portraitists regularly sacrificed verisimilitude for a more idealized depiction of character or status-enhancing associations.⁷

The method of visual allusion and assimilation, in which an image can simultaneously resemble more than one person or idea, was a tool that portrait artists commonly employed to characterize their subjects. In the depiction of relatives, family traits and resemblances could be accentuated to call attention to bloodlines.⁸ As a result, Agrippina would not only be legitimizing the reigns of both her husband and her son, but she would also be gaining a political advantage

by recalling the memory of her parents, who were held in high esteem during their lives. This evocation is a fine line between introducing formal elements of the emperor's physiognomic type into the female portraits in a way that is clearly recognizable and suggestive, yet not masculinizing.⁹ When comparing contemporary images of Agrippina and Nero, historians note that Agrippina's portrait appears "Neronian" not in date but in physiognomic features, and the viewer's translation becomes "Agrippina, mother of Nero." It is also likely that these portrait types of Agrippina and Nero were made together to refer to one another (Figures 1 and 2). Many imperial portraits were viewed in the context of dynastic groups, and so it is possible that certain features were emphasized to draw a resemblance between individuals within the same group.¹⁰ In the case of Agrippina's Stuttgart type portrait, for example, it seems that her previous portrait types may have simply been adapted and altered to include this assimilation to Nero in order to emphasize Nero's Julian heritage and therefore secure his claim to imperial power.¹¹

Where does this tradition of physiognomic assimilation come from? To find the answer, an historian should examine Hellenistic influences on the portraiture of imperial women. This influence should not be underestimated because there were few depictions of women presented in a public context before the time of the triumvirate, while depictions of Hellenistic queens were widespread in the eastern provinces.¹² The phenomenon of gender transcendence has precedence in Hellenistic and Ptolemaic examples, especially when it comes to depictions of Cleopatra I and II, which display distinctively masculine features.

Such widespread Hellenistic imagery also includes coins depicting Cleopatra VII during the Late Republic. These depictions show her as a beneficent ruler and protector of the state. We must not forget that the Hellenistic queens had a greater scope of political power than our imperial empresses—Cleopatra was the legitimate heir of authority and power from her father and was worshiped as a goddess in her own right, whereas women of the imperial family had extremely limited political power within the public sphere.¹³ An emula-

³ The small bronze bust of Agrippina from Alba Fucens may be identified as one such miniature. See Barrett, *Agrippina*, 130.

⁴ R. R. Smith et al., "Roman Portraits: Honours, Empresses, and Late Emperors," *Journal of Roman Studies* 75 (1985): 213.

⁵ Constantina Katarsi, "Public Images of Roman Imperial Women during the Julio-Claudian Period: A Review Article," *Women's Studies' Review* 8 (2001): 1-12.

⁶ Smith et al., "Roman Portraits," 214.

⁷ Natalie Boymel Kampen, "Gender Theory in Roman Art", in *I, Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome*, ed. Diana Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1996), 14-25.

⁸ Judith Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 61. Agrippina's portraits tend to stress the broad, square jaw, as

well as the retreating, yet sharp, chin of Germanicus. A perfect example can be seen in their respective portraits on the Gemma Claudia.

⁹ Smith et al., "Roman Portraits," 214.

¹⁰ As far as dynastic portrait groups are concerned, Agrippina's appearance is recorded in approximately eleven groups of Claudian or Neronian date. See Charles Brian Rose, *Dynastic Commemoration and Imperial Portraiture in the Julio-Claudian Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Wood mentions that the princess probably did not sit for a new portrait in 54 CE for the creation of the Stuttgart portrait type and that the type was likely a modification of the existing Ancona and Milan types, from which it only deviates slightly. See Wood, *Imperial Women*, 299.

¹² Katarsi, "Public Images."

¹³ *Ibid.*

tion of Hellenistic modes of depiction tells us that imperial women had a role to play in the public domain—that is, to strengthen the dynastic power and authority of their families, to personify virtues that the emperor sought to promote, and to represent the continuation of the dynasty.¹⁴

For an imperial woman with a prestigious bloodline such as Agrippina's, strengthening the authority of her family was of the utmost importance when it came to continuing the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Portraits of the imperial women were generally either "prospective" or "retrospective," in that they not only represented the continuation of a dynasty, but also provided a link back to other distinguished members of the Julio-Claudian family.¹⁵ Portraits such as the portrait of Agrippina the Younger from the Museo Charamonti show a heavy assimilation with her mother, Agrippina the Elder, likely in an attempt to claim the respect that was given to the latter by association (Figures 3 and 4).¹⁶ Susan Wood has put forward the idea that a new portrait type of Agrippina the Elder was issued after her death in order to underscore the link between the two generations of women.¹⁷

It is certainly possible that Agrippina the Younger's imagery aims to provide a retrospective link back to her father, Germanicus, a beloved general and adopted son of Tiberius. Through the tool of gender transcendence, it is likely that Agrippina's Copenhagen/Ancona portrait type shows notable physiognomic similarities to portraits of Germanicus (Figures 5 and 6). Resembling one's father was a fashionable trait in the Roman world, and Pliny the Elder's letters reflect this.¹⁸ In one letter, Pliny praises the daughter of a friend, Minicia, as a true copy of her father, not only in outer appearance, but also in manners and character.¹⁹ Here, it is important to point out that virtues were, and still are, tied to gender, and in the ancient world, women were often thought to be irrational and lacking judgment, whereas the male mind was associated with reason and discernment.²⁰ Women who were praised for their "male" rationality and their "manly" courage were almost seen, in a sense, as honorary men.

A woman, by taking on the attributes of a male, instantly became more virtuous.²¹ Often, the ability for a woman to inherit and transmit these "male" qualities was regarded as a credit to her male relatives and, especially, to her father.²² Consequently, we can understand the great significance of why Tacitus repeatedly mentions that Agrippina depended on her position as the daughter of Germanicus to uphold her political influence.²³ Proceeding further, we also understand the significance of the incorporation of Germanicus' physiognomic traits within the portraits of his daughter.

Certainly it is possible that the Copenhagen/Ancona type may aim to suggest a resemblance to Agrippina's uncle and husband Claudius, as opposed to Germanicus (Figures 7 and 8). This idea has been the most commonly and readily accepted explanation for the slightly masculine facial features because the tool of gender transcendence could also be used to emphasize legal relation as well as familial relation. In fact, portrait artists often employed the technique to create a false resemblance between people who were not even related by subtly manipulating their features. While subjective, the frequent evocation of the emperor's image in the portraits of his wife has been acknowledged by many scholars.²⁴ A practice common in Hellenistic art, and later in the art of the Empire, it is most notable in the coins of Marc Antony that feature his Roman wife Octavia, and his later wife Cleopatra VII. Eric Varner mentions that due to these depictions of Cleopatra that assimilate the physiognomic features of Antony, scholars have taken her depictions on coins "at face value" and have had difficulty reconciling the noted literary accounts of the queen's beauty with her more masculine depictions.²⁵ With this assimilation, Cleopatra is not subjugating herself to Antony, but rather appropriating aspects of his masculine identity to fashion herself as a worthy opponent to Octavian and the Roman Empire in the west.

This could be taken to an even greater extent when we examine the Fayum type of Livia's portraits, which seem to give her a new face shape that derives from the typically

Élite from Cornelia to Julia Domna (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁴ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 61.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Kleiner and Matheson, *I, Claudia*. Agrippina's mother, Agrippina the Elder, set a new standard for women in public life. She headed her own political party, the *Partes Agrippinae*, with the aim of securing the throne for one of her sons. She was the antithesis of the woman of the *domus* in that she exhibited loyalty, courage, and a lack of domestic serenity while still embodying the idea of *pudicitia*, or chastity. Agrippina's role in the political sphere was more active than it was thought women should be, especially when compared to her grandmother Livia, wife of Augustus, who was the exemplary model of the passive, virtuous *femina*. Agrippina the Younger would also later start her own party. See Richard A. Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1992), 120-195.

¹⁷ Susan Wood, "Memoriae Agrippinae: Agrippina the Elder in Julio-Claudian Art and Propaganda," *American Journal of Archaeology* 92, no. 3 (1998): 409-426.

¹⁸ Emily Ann Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta: Educated Women in the Roman*

¹⁹ Plin., *Ep.* 5.16.9: "Ignosces, laudabis etiam, si cogitaveris quid amiserit. Amisit enim filiam, quae non minus mores eius quam osvultumque referebat, totumque patrem mira similitudine exscripserat."

²⁰ Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta*, 91.

²¹ Kampen, "Gender Theory," 14-25.

²² Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta*, 91.

²³ See Judith P. Hallett, *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 57, for a list of references in Tacitus.

²⁴ Smith et al., "Roman Portraits," 209-221.

²⁵ Eric Varner, "Transcending Gender: Assimilation, Identity and Roman Imperial Portraits," in *Role Models: Identity and Assimilation in the Roman World*, ed. S. Bell and I. Hansen (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 190.

Julian triangular face, assimilating her features to those of her husband Augustus.²⁶ At the same time, this creates a fictitious resemblance between Augustus and his adoptive son Tiberius, with whom he had absolutely no blood relation. All of this was done to remind the viewer of a family tie that was legal and not made by blood.²⁷ Later portraits of Faustina the Younger integrate the physiognomy of her husband by incorporating the heavy brows and bulging eyes of Marcus Aurelius, seemingly to associate herself with a family to which she belonged through marriage and not blood.²⁸ Sometimes, it was taken to an even greater extreme—for example, in the numismatic images of Maximinus Thrax and his wife Paulina, the pair is shown as identical, with Paulina simply lacking a beard and wearing a veil.²⁹ We can see how our modern expectations of gender have likely led to the misidentification of portraits that display such an exaggerated degree of gender transcendence.

It should be clear that this masculine resemblance is by no means the result of careless carving. Instead, it was a tool used intentionally to refer to other portraits, therefore allowing women like Agrippina to benefit from the associations

made with other prominent individuals. In the literature, Agrippina is cast as a woman who crossed the barriers of gender in order to gain political recognition. The transcendence of gender that we see in the portraits of Agrippina was used as a vehicle to break through the social confines of gender and its associated characteristics, allowing her to gain a small amount of authority within the dynasty. This tool of gender transcendence was used not only to legitimize the continuation of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, but also to further Agrippina's own aspirations in association with her father, an assimilation that allowed her to play on his popularity and appear favorable to his political faction. As a result, a masculine assimilation does not reflect Agrippina subjugating herself to or defining herself through her male counterparts. Rather, Agrippina's portraits show a woman striving to break free of the social confines of gender by embodying male attributes in an effort to gain prominence in a world that regarded women as a weak link.

Louisiana State University

[*facing page, upper left*] Figure 1. Agrippina the Younger, Stuttgart type, 54-59 CE, marble, h. 40.5 cm. Stuttgart, Württembergisches Landesmuseum, Arch, 68/2. Wikimedia Commons.

[*facing page, upper right*] Figure 2. Nero, 55-59 CE, marble. Olbia (Sardinia), Cagliari, Museo Nazionale di Cagliari. Photo credit: Dan Diffendale.

[*facing page, lower left*] Figure 3. Agrippina the Younger, detail of face from statue of Ancona type, 49-54 CE, marble, h. 183 cm. Vatican, Museo Chiaramonti, inv. 2084.

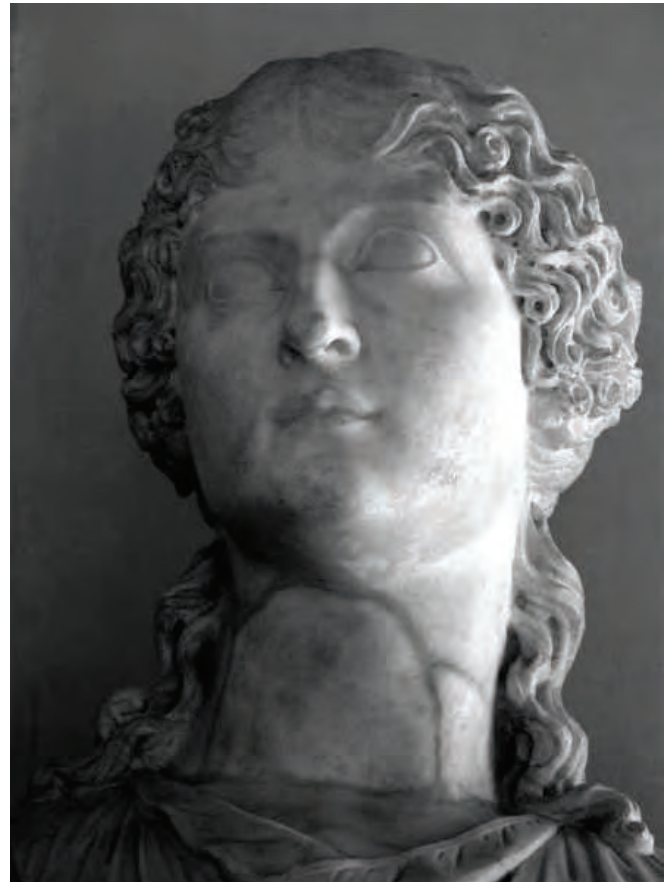
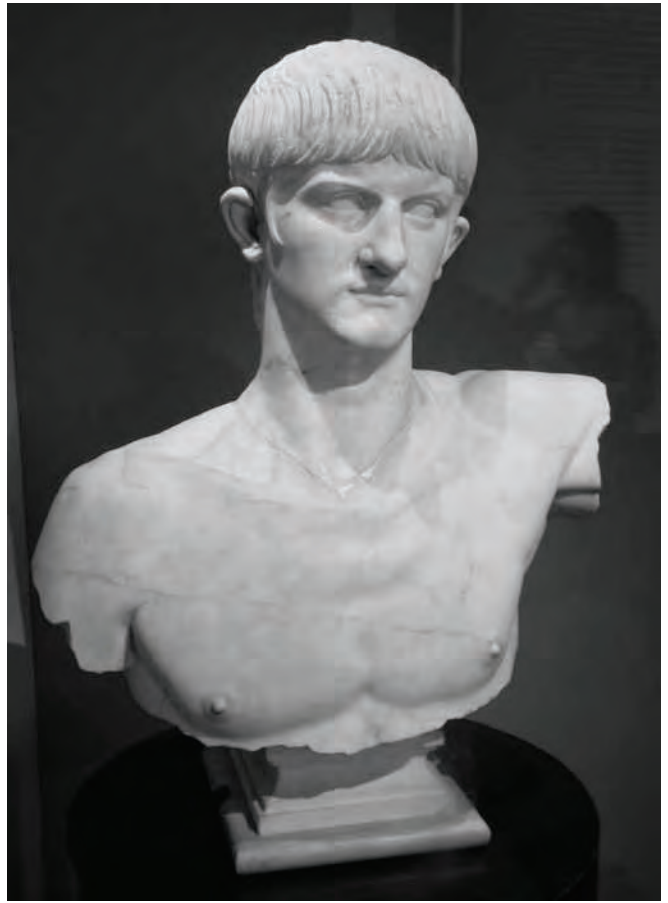
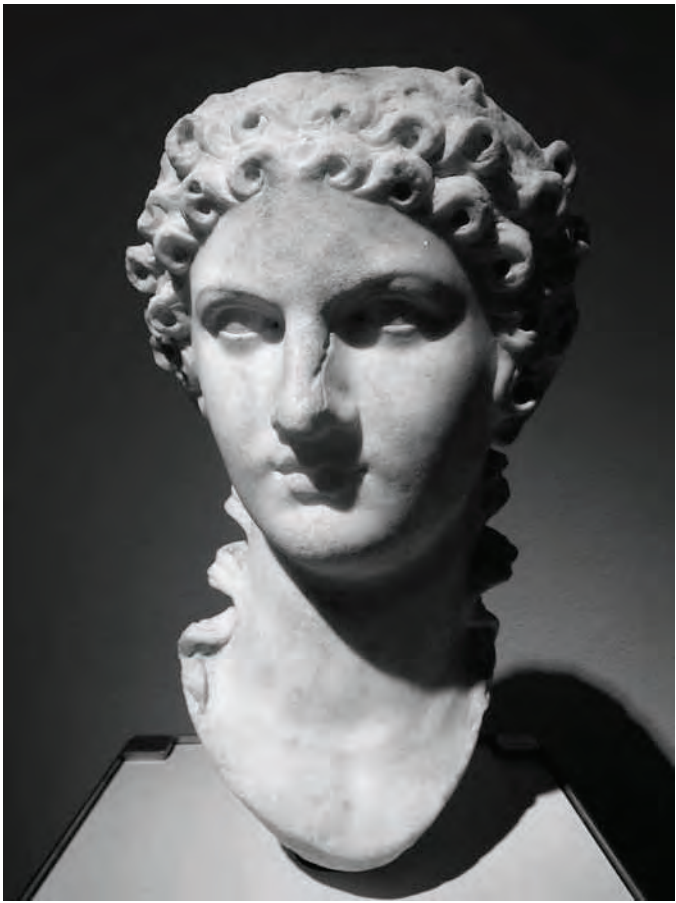
[*facing page, lower right*] Figure 4. Agrippina the Elder, 17 BCE-33 CE, marble, h. 59 cm. Rome, Museo Capitolino, inv. MC0421. Photo credit: ElissaSCA.

²⁶ Wood, *Imperial Women*, 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ A less subtle form of this type of gender transcendence is seen in images of the Trajanic women, who take on a noticeable masculine appearance. See Smith et al., "Roman Portraits," 214.

²⁹ *Ibid.*



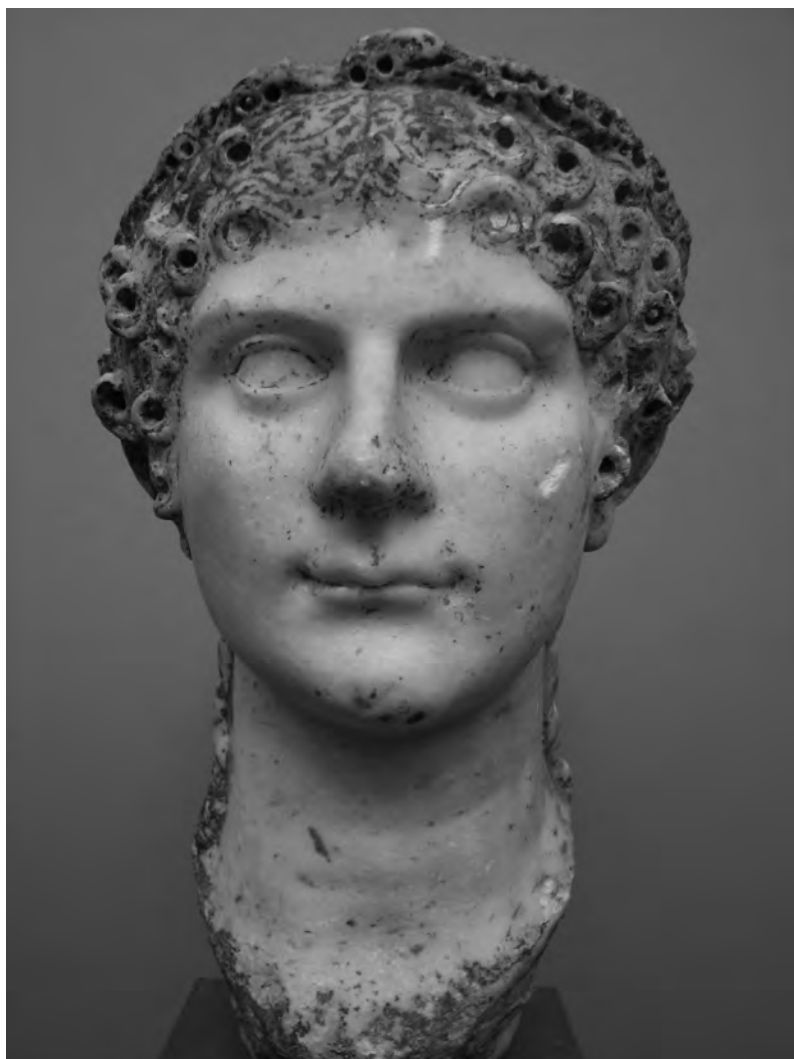


Figure 5. Agrippina the Younger, Copenhagen/Ancona type with diadem, 49-54 CE, marble, h. 36 cm. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, cat. 636. Photo credit: Peter Repetti.

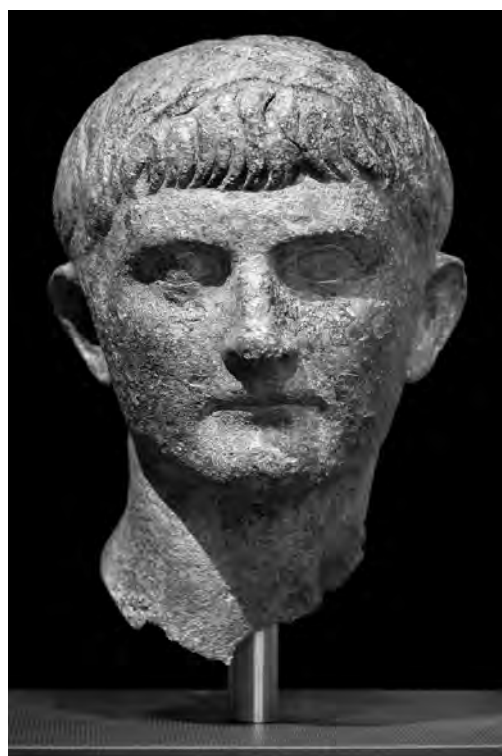


Figure 6. Germanicus, bronze, 15 BCE-19 CE. Rome, Palazzo Massimo, Museo Nazionale Romano.

Figure 7. Agrippina the Younger, Copenhagen/Ancona type with diadem, 49-54 CE, marble. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum. Photo credit: Joe Geranio.

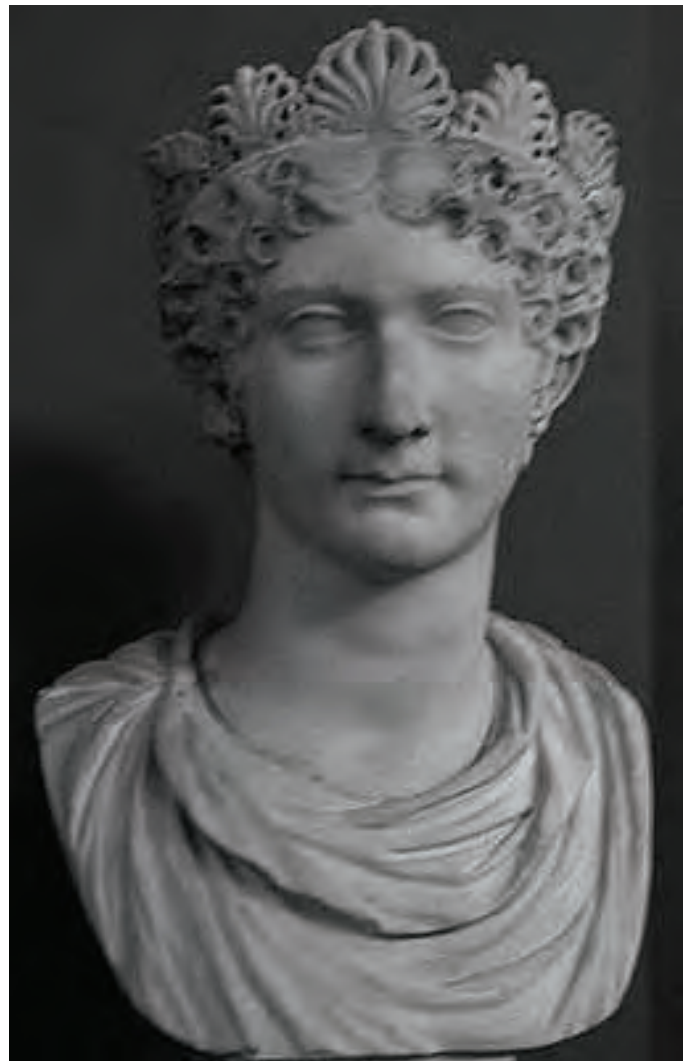


Figure 8. Claudius, 41-54 CE, marble. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. Wikimedia Commons.