

TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

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One of the most iconic finds from the excavation of the Palace at Fishbourne was the remains of a head showing a young man. Indeed the find was used to illustrate the dust cover of the book on the discovery and excavation of the Palace (Cunliffe, 1971). Originally thought to be a head of a local noble, recent research by Dr. Miles Russell (Russell and Manley, 2013) has suggested it may be the head of young Nero.

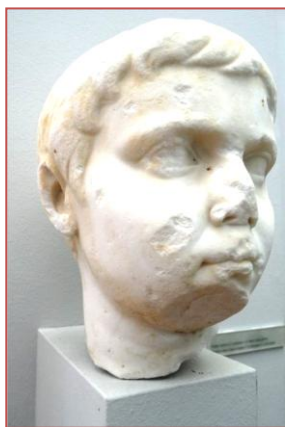


The Fishbourne head

Following the accidental discovery in 1960 of a substantial Roman building a series of excavations were carried out between 1961 and 1968. The excavations uncovered a series of rooms containing high status mosaic floors dating from the 1st C. AD. The earliest occupation seemed to date from not long after the Claudian invasion of 43 AD. The badly fragmented head was discovered in 1964 in a robber trench in the North Wing. It has recently been proposed (Russell and Manley 2013) that the head was part of the demolition material from the so-called proto palace dated AD 43-75. The remains comprise part of the right side of the head. Close examination appeared to show the damage was deliberate. The head has been scanned and a virtual reconstruction carried out (Russell and Manley). The suggestion following this work and comparison with other portrait busts is that it represents a teen-aged Nero, the head dating from the mid-first century AD.

On a recent visit to Split, Croatia, the authors visited the wonderful Archaeology Museum. Founded in 1820 this is one of the oldest museums in SE Europe. It contains finds from the site of the Roman capital of Dalmatia called Salona which lies in the northern outskirts of Split. The finds in the museum contain the head of a young Nero, dated to the middle 1st century AD which looks very similar to the Fishbourne Head.

Salona became the capital of the Roman province of Dalmatia following their support of Caesar during the war against Pompey. It became the *Colonia Martia Iulia Salona*. In the 3rd C. AD the local boy made good (Emperor Diocletian) had a magnificent Palace built in the vicinity and retired here in 305 AD. The Palace is still extant as a substantial part of the city of Split in Croatia. During this period the last pogrom against the Christians took place and the bishop of Salona called Domnio was executed in the Amphitheatre. Following the Edict of Milan in 313 AD which granted religious tolerance the city of Salona was substantially remodelled to accommodate a shrine/cathedral dedicated to St. Domnio. However the city finally met its end in the 7th C when it was overrun by Avars and Slavs.



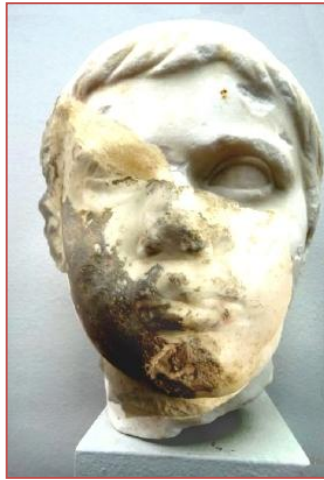
The Salona head

The site has been excavated sporadically starting with an excavation by Franc Bulic in the 1890s. The unstable nature of the region up to the recent war (1991-1994) has led to subsequent interrupted excavations with the latest excavations in the later 1990s to 2000s.

The Archaeology Museum, Split

The finds from Salona deposited in the museum contain a marble head described (Marin, 2003) as young Nero, dated to the middle of the 1st century AD. (The museum label dates it to "the 2nd-3rd decade of the 1st century AD" but as Nero was born in 37AD this must be incorrect.) The resemblance to the remains of the Fishbourne head is notable. By manipulating the pictures in Photoshop Elements it was possible to overlay the pictures of the Fishbourne head on those from Salona. Sadly the one piece missing from the Salona head is the chin which is more intact on the Fishbourne fragment but otherwise the match of the eye, nose and mouth is good. It was quite common

in the Imperial period for more or less identical images of the Imperial family to be manufactured and sent around the Empire. It is not surprising that these heads should match even though they were found almost 1000 miles apart! Two heads are definitely better than one for affirming the identification of our head as the teenage Nero.



The Fishbourne head superimposed on that of Salona

References:
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