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A MARBLE HEAD IN THE NY CARLSBERG GLYPTOTEK OF COPENHAGEN. EMPEROR NERVA'S PROVINCIAL PORTRAITS BETWEEN SCULPTURE AND COINS

Raffaella Bucolo*

Keywords: Roman Imperial Portraits, Roman Provincial Coinage, Roman Provinces, Nerva.

Parole chiave: ritratto romano imperiale, monetazione romana provinciale, Province romane, Nerva.

Abstract:

The paper analyses a portrait head currently held at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, which, according to the Museum's documentation, is probably from Rhodes. The portrait has been published since its acquisition and has undergone varying interpretations over the decades. Initially, it was identified as that of the emperor Nerva, but later, it was preferably attributed to a private citizen of the late 1st - early 2nd century AD. The heavily polished artwork has distinctive facial features and hairstyles. The physiognomic peculiarity provides a basis for comparison with the portrait of Nerva on coins minted in Rhodes during his short reign. The image of this emperor is rare, with significant variations due to the recutting of Domitian's portraits. This paper provides a brief overview of the presence and characteristics of Nerva's image in the provinces of the Roman Empire through the analysis of various media.

L'articolo prende in esame una testa ritratto conservata nella Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek di Copenaghen che, stando alla documentazione del Museo, risulta proveniente da Rodi. Il ritratto è stato pubblicato fin dalla sua acquisizione e diversamente interpretato nel corso dei decenni. Inizialmente riconosciuto come raffigurante l'imperatore Nerva, in seguito è stato preferibilmente attribuito ad un cittadino privato della fine del I, inizio del II secolo d.C. L'opera, pesantemente polita in epoca moderna, presenta un volto e un'acconciatura peculiari. Proprio la particolarità fisionomica ha permesso di proporre un confronto con il ritratto di Nerva raffigurato sulle monete coniate a Rodi negli anni del suo breve regno. L'immagine di questo imperatore è piuttosto rara e presenta profonde variazioni a causa del massiccio riutilizzo di ritratti di Domiziano. Attraverso l'analisi di diversi media si propone una breve disamina della presenza e delle caratteristiche dell'immagine di Nerva nelle provincie dell'Impero.

In 1961, the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen acquired an over-life-size marble male portrait from the antiquities market. According to the Museum documentation, the provenance is recorded as allegedly from Rhodes¹ (figg. 1-4).

The portrait, slightly turned to the left, is broken below the neck attachment; the nose and chin are missing. The ears and upper lip are also damaged. The face is distinctive and angular, with a prominent and sharply defined jawline

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This paper presents a case study of my work within the ERC-funded project RESP, *The Roman Emperor seen from the Provinces. Imaging Roman Power in the Cities of the Empire from Augustus to the Tetrarchs (31 BC-AD 297)* (GA:101002763). The project is funded by the Horizon 2020 programme and is based at the University of Verona in partnership with King's College London and the Warwick University Manufacturing Group. I want to express my gratitude to the members of the RESP research team, Dario Calomino, Julia Lenaghan, Francesca Bologna, Giorgia Cafici, Hristina

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¹ Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, inv. no. IN 3282. H (max): 33 cm; D (max): 25 cm; W (max): 9 cm; white marble.

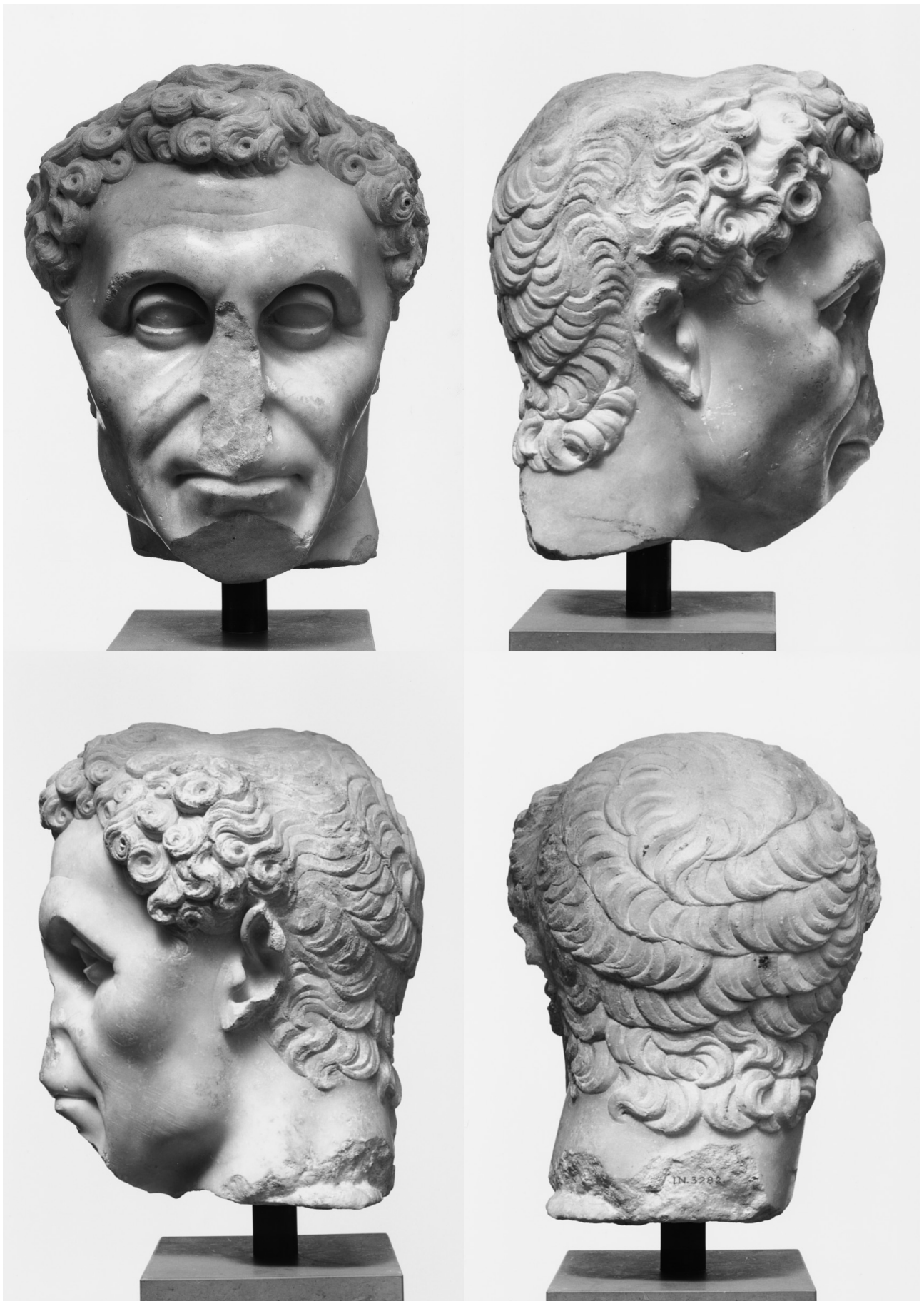


Fig. 1-4. Marble portrait head. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, inv. no. IN 3282 (Photo: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek / Jo Selsing).

leading to a pointed chin. In contrast, the forehead is broad and high, with two deep wrinkles and protruding frontal bosses. Only the nose attachment has been preserved, and judging by the fracture trace, it was likely long and narrow.

The facial structure exhibits several notable characteristics, such as the large, closely spaced eyes, which seem to be deeply set within the orbit and framed by slender eyebrows. The smooth, prominent eyeballs are clearly defined by thick eyelids with small wrinkles at the sides of the eyes. The long, deep nose-labial wrinkles and sharply defined cheekbones accentuate the face's thinness. The mouth is large and protruding. Overall, the facial features present a striking and distinctive appearance.

The hairstyle is equally worthy of attention. The arrangement of wavy curls and locks in a crown around the forehead and temples creates a chiaroscuro effect that adds depth and contrast to the overall appearance. Additionally, the calligraphic wavy locks at the nape contribute to a sense of elegance and refinement.

The hair strands originate from the top of the head and are arranged radially, with their tips pointing left or right. Towards the base of the neck, the strands are longer and open up almost at the centre, with their tips pointing in opposite directions. The back of the head is flattened and simplified, likely because it was not visible. The preserved part of the hairstyle suggests that the ears were relatively more prominent and protruding.

The four short, sleek locks that appear beneath the three central curls, pointing towards the left, are worth mentioning to provide a complete overview of the hairstyle.

This portrait depicts a mature man, as evidenced by the wrinkles. Furthermore, chiaroscuro is used to emphasise the intense expressiveness and *gravitas* of the face, mainly in the eyes.

During the recent examination, traces of paint were found in the hair, while no pigments were detected on the skin's surface. A few individual red grains were observed on the left side of the neck, and red and maroon grains were scattered throughout the hair. Additionally, small black traces were seen in the left eye², confirming the antiquity of the portrait, highly polished in modern times.

The portrait's distinctive fashion style allows it to be dated to the end of the 1st century AD or the beginning of the 2nd century AD.

Although the Museum records only a referred provenance from Rhodes, some stylistic features and comparisons confirm the production in the province of Asia Minor.

For instance, a late Flavian-Trajanic male bust from Syedra exhibits the same rigidity in defining the highly pronounced facial features³.

Another fitting comparison - iconographic and stylistic - can be found with a marble head from Iznik (Nicaea), now in the Bursa Museum and dated to the time of Nerva⁴. This head depicts an elderly man and shares with the Copenhagen portrait the narrow, hollow eyes, sunken cheeks, and wide mouth with tight lips. Both portraits are characterized by a clearly defined bone structure, an emphasized look, deep lines in their hair, and accentuated corners, such as those of the mouth or the tear channels.

However, it is the identity of the individual portrayed in the head in Copenhagen that poses the real challenge.

In 1961, immediately after its purchase by the Museum, the head was published by Vagn Poulsen⁵. Poulsen detected an unusual quality in the subject's facial features, characterised by accentuated and pathetic traits typical of a "Greek" style. Despite some variations, such as the peculiar hairstyle, the scholar suggested that the head represented a portrait of the Roman emperor Nerva, specifically a "Greek Nerva." Poulsen explained the portrait's style as influenced by the need for rapid production and distribution of Nerva's image throughout the empire.

In 1966, a chapter in the volume 'Die Flavii' of the series 'Das Römische Herrscherbild' was devoted to Nerva comprehensively analysing the characteristics of his portraits. The head in the Glyptotek was listed among Nerva's portraits, although the authors questioned it due to several doubts. Specifically, the eyes and curly hair led to express reservations about this identification⁶.

In their seminal paper on *damnatio memoriae*, Marianne Bergmann and Paul Zanker analysed Nerva's iconography and cautiously excluded the Copenhagen portrait. Despite its over-life size, they interpreted the sitter as a private man with a *Lockentoupet* hairstyle⁷.

Ten years later, in 1994, in the 'Roman Portrait Catalogue' of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Flemming Johansen rejected the head's identification as Nerva, suggesting a posthumous portrait of Julio Caesar instead⁸.

After several years, it appears that the complexity of the portrait requires further consideration, particularly in light of new research on provincial coinage.

² SKOVMOELLER, THERKILDSEN 2015, p. 889; <https://www.trackingcolour.com/objects/145>.

³ Analya Museum, inv. no. 2281: INAN, ALFÖLDI-ROSENBAUM 1979, p. 264, no. 247; arachne.dainst.org/entity/1095661.

⁴ Bursa Museum, inv. no. 75: INAN, ROSENBAUM 1966, p. 93, no. 74.

⁵ POULSEN 1961, pp. 23-28; POULSEN 1974, pp. 62-63, no. 33.

⁶ DALTRÖP, HAUSMANN, WEGNER 1966, p. 110.

⁷ BERGMANN, ZANKER 1981, p. 388.

⁸ JOHANSEN 1994, p. 90, no. 32.

Bergmann and Zanker correctly focused on the hairstyle, which can be dated to the end of the Flavian era.

Curly toupee hairstyles were primarily known as women's fashion in the Flavian period. Petra Cain's systematic study of Neronian-Flavian male portraits and relevant written sources showed that these coiffures reflected a widespread trend towards luxury hairstyles, which gradually became established, especially from the time of Nero onwards⁹.

The portrait in Copenhagen, which was not included in Cain's extensive examination, shares a similar hairstyle with male heads dated to the late Flavian and Nerva's age, such as the ones in the Torlonia collection and the Louvre Museum¹⁰. All these examples have a thick crown of curls on the forehead and temples, while the hair is flatter on the back of the head.

Yet the portrait that comes closest to the Copenhagen portrait in terms of coiffure is a male bust found in the Anavarza Necropolis, now kept in the Adana Museum¹¹. The hair strands on the young man's head originate from the top and are arranged radially, with short and wavy locks on his forehead. Once again, the distinguishing feature is the crown of large curls arranged from ear to ear. The curls, in this case, are placed higher, making the underlying strands more visible. The bust dates to the early years of Hadrian's reign, with a late Flavian reminiscence in the hairstyle, as it is precisely comparable to the head in Copenhagen¹².

A further fitting comparison can be found in a portrait from Egypt now in Berlin¹³, which especially shows similar facial features.

In 1972, Demetrios Pandermalis noted and emphasised the close resemblance between this head from Egypt and the emperor Nerva by comparing it to a coin portrait and the profile on the Cancelleria Relief. The scholar tentatively identified this portrait as a member of the emperor's court or the emperor himself, perhaps depicted as *Pontifex Maximus*¹⁴.

Although different interpretations have since been suggested, the head's resemblance to Nerva's very distinctive face—in the sense of *Zeitgesicht*—remains undeniable¹⁵.

Upon the assassination of Domitian, Marcus Cocceius Nerva ruled for just 16 months, from September AD 96 to January AD 98. He was already 65 years old when he rose to power, a patrician, distinguished senator, twice consul, and an essential member of the imperial court since the reign of Nero¹⁶.

Emperor Nerva's brief reign constituted a critical historical and political transition period. After the violent end of the last of the Flavians, Domitian, Rome went from a dynastic and hereditary government to the adoptive system of the 2nd century AD.

Although Nerva's reign was brief, it was significant that his sudden ascension to the imperial throne created an urgent need for images¹⁷, which were immediately disseminated through coins and portraits.

Due to the memory sanctions against Domitian, the majority of Nerva's portraits are re-carved, and the most complete surviving record of his image is to be found in numismatic portrait¹⁸. These are characterised by a high, sloping forehead, closely set eyes, long, bowed nose, pointed chin, hollow cheekbones, and a prominent Adam's apple. He shows a full head of hair arranged in short, wavy locks over the forehead. Artistically the style lacks idealism, and we may believe his features are not modified, belonging to a man advanced in years¹⁹ (fig. 5).

The portraiture of the 65-year-old Nerva was in line with that once used by the élite of the Republic, a style that aimed to emphasise *gravitas* as a sign of wisdom and moderation.

The metropolitan coins show only a single official portrait (Type 1), mainly characterized by the locks arranged on the forehead and facial features, well-represented in a marble head from Rome, which is now in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek²⁰.

However, Jane Fejfer has suggested that even this Copenhagen portrait may have been reworked. She rightly points out that the original arrangement of the frontal curls is still visible, and the long hair at the nape of the neck is typical of Domitian's portraits²¹ (fig. 6).

⁹ See also BERGMANN 2013, pp. 355-358.

¹⁰ Rome, Museo Torlonia, inv. no. 80; CAIN 1993, pp. 219-220, no. 93; arachne.dainst.org/entity/1086427; Paris, Louvre Museum, inv. no. Ma 997; DE KERSAUSON 1996, pp. 64-65, no. 23.

¹¹ Adana Museum, inv. no. 38.12.1973; INAN, ALFÖLDI-ROSENBAUM 1979, pp. 266-267, no. 250; arachne.dainst.org/entity/1095658.

¹² INAN, ALFÖLDI-ROSENBAUM 1979, p. 266.

¹³ Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Antike Sammlung, inv. no. Sk 1862.

¹⁴ PANDERMALIS 1972, who explained the hairstyle, interpreting the portrait as reworked from that of a woman.

¹⁵ KISS 1984, pp. 54-55; CAIN 1993, pp. 126-128, no. 8; arachne.

dainst.org/entity/1062737 (M. BERGMANN).

¹⁶ COLLINS 2009, pp. 92-101; KIENAST, ECK, HEIL 2017, pp. 114-115; ELKINS 2023.

¹⁷ FEJFER 2021, p. 74.

¹⁸ ELKINS 2017, p. 82; ELKINS 2021.

¹⁹ RIC II, pp. 220-233; DALTRÖP, HAUSMANN, WEGNER 1966, pp. 43-44.

²⁰ ZANKER 1979, pp. 311-313; JOHANSEN 1994, p. 88, no. 31.

²¹ FEJFER 2008, pp. 377-378. This observation led to a further reduction in the number of Nerva's representations, which are believed to be unreworke.



Fig. 5. Sestertius of Nerva, AD 97. Obverse bearing the portrait of Nerva (Photo: Berlin, Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen, 18204404/ Dirk Sonnenwald).



Fig. 6. Marble portrait head of Nerva. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, inv. no. 772 (Photo: Raffaella Bucolo).

A noteworthy aspect to consider, still little investigated, is the circulation of Nerva's numismatic portraits throughout the Empire, particularly in the eastern provinces, where coins bearing his image were struck at 25 mints²².

His profile with the characteristic hooked nose is easily identifiable, although variations are sometimes evident, as will be illustrated in a specific case. However, there are varying degrees of variance, likely due to stylistic choices, local reception of the metropolitan model, or the die-cutters' varying skills.

Thirty-seven inscriptions bearing Nerva's name²³ have been found in the provinces, attesting to the existence of statues depicting the emperor, with a particular concentration in Asia Minor. This suggests that the cities in Asia Minor responded more rapidly to the new political situation²⁴.

Jakob Højte has pointed out how Nerva's accession marked a turning point in dedicating imperial statue²⁵. The quantity of Flavian statues was unexpectedly low, and their distribution upon their accession was relatively slow; in contrast, the significant number of statues erected during Nerva's short reign indicates a change in attitude. Indeed, the necessity to quickly replace the former emperor with the new one also played a relevant role.

The inscriptions document this phenomenon, but the surviving portraits cannot be relied upon as there are only a few remaining examples of sculptures in the provinces: two colossal heads exhibiting a distinctively local style have been found—one at Aphrodisias²⁶ and the other at Aenona in Dalmatia, the latter reworked²⁷.

Furthermore, a miniature bronze cuirassed portrait from Cilicia has been recently identified as Nerva²⁸.

These examples prove the variability in Nerva's representation, which may be due to differences in style or reworking, despite being based on a well-characterized profile.

²² Melus (Achaia): *RPC* III, 404; Thessalonica, Cassandrea (Macedonia): *RPC* III, 616, 636; Tomi (Moesia Inferior): *RPC* III, 774-778; Sinope (Bithynia-Pontus): *RPC* III, 1214-1216; Parium, Apollonia ad Rhyndacum (Mysia): *RPC* III, 1533, 1589-1594; Cyme, Myrina (Aeolis): *RPC* III, 1927-1928, 1929; Ephesus (Ionia): *RPC* III, 2045-2046; Rhodes (Caria): 2176-2182; Sardis (Lydia): *RPC* III, 2390; Ancyra, Synnada (Phrygia): *RPC* III, 2531, 2618-2620; Koinon of Lycia (Lycia-Pamphilia): *RPC* III, 2673-2675; Sagalassus, Ancyra, Comana, Tyana, Caesarea (Galatia-Cappadocia): *RPC* III, 2788-2792; 2826-2834; 2920; 2945B; 2960-2977; Aegeae, Hierapolis-Castabala, Epiphanea (Cilicia): *RPC* III, 3328, 3380-3383,

3391; Antioch (Syria): *RPC* III, 3476-3501; Alexandria (Egypt): *RPC* III, 4111-4119.

²³ HØJTE 2005, pp. 48, 135-136, 367-373; it must be considered that a few inscriptions were dedicated to Nerva as *Divus*.

²⁴ HØJTE 2005, p. 100. This massive presence is also explained by the statues of Domitian available for re-modelling.

²⁵ HØJTE 2005, p. 151.

²⁶ SMITH 2006, pp. 260-261, no. 164.

²⁷ KOLEGA 1992.

²⁸ Adana Museum, inv. no. 11.12.84; DOĞANAY 2011.



Fig. 7. Didrachm of Rhodes struck under Nerva, AD 96-98. Obverse bearing the portrait of Nerva (CNG 90, 23 May 2012, lot 1034, ex Sternberg VII, 24-5 Nov. 1977, lot 604).

After this brief overview, it is possible to return to the head in Copenhagen, considering the similarities and differences between this portrait and the metropolitan model.

While studying Nerva's portraits on provincial coins, I immediately saw a remarkable connection between the marble portrait and some coins from Rhodes, the location which the Museum gives as the sculpture's place of origin.

The profiles on the obverses of three Rhodian coin types are easily recognisable as Nerva²⁹, but a direct comparison with the portraits on metropolitan coins reveals certain peculiarities.

On both provincial and Roman coins, the profiles are represented with a long and hooked nose, a pointed chin, and a long wrinkle furrowing the forehead. The neck is also very long, with a prominent Adam's apple.

However, the portraits on Rhodian coins have a square face with a highlighted jaw. The hair is also styled differently, shorter, and arranged in small straight locks on the forehead (fig. 7).

Upon comparing the coin profile and the marble head in Copenhagen, several similarities, apart from the curly hair, are immediately visible. These include the prominent forehead with wrinkles, the rendering of the cheek and the angle of the eye, the squared and pronounced jaw, the protruding mouth, and the double chin. Such likeness suggests a mutual interdependence between coins and sculpture, as both vary from the metropolitan model.

Based on these observations, the question inevitably arises whether we can consider the Copenhagen portrait to represent Nerva, especially in the light of the differences it shows when compared to the metropolitan type, particularly clear when assessing its hairstyle. Based mainly on the observation of the model provided by the coins, Nerva's hair appears wavy, arranged in small, hooked locks on the forehead that open above the visible eye.

To support this thesis, the Rhodian coin's profile has been directly compared with a 3D model of the head in Copenhagen, revealing a near-perfect match between the two faces³⁰ (figg. 8-9). The superimposition is so accurate that the coin's profile appears to restore the sculpture's missing nose credibly.

However, as previously stated, the hairstyle is the only feature that does not correspond. The curly hairstyle of the head in Copenhagen exhibits a strikingly analogous correspondence with another over-life-size marble portrait, this one discovered at the Old Forum of Leptis Magna³¹. This head has specific characteristics consistent with the local style and similar to Nerva's portrait, once again, except for the hairstyle³².

²⁹ The observed differences can be attributed to the distinct hand of the die-cutters, but the portraits are evidently derived from the same reference model.

³⁰ The coin in the best condition was selected from the RPC and scaled to fit the 3D model of the head. The profiles were manually aligned with the bridge of the nose using Photoshop. I want to express my gratitude to Mike Donnelly and Paul Wilson for creating the 3D model

of the head. I would also like to thank Francesca Bologna and Daniele Bursich for helping me to compare the portrait with the coin digitally.

³¹ Leptis Magna Museum, inv. no. 675: CAIN 1993, p. 242, no. 118; BUCCINO 2014, pp. 24-25; arachne.dainst.org/entity/6336554.

³² BUCCINO 2014, p. 25. I want to thank Laura Buccino for sharing the photographs of the portrait from Leptis Magna with me and for her valuable suggestion.



Fig. 8-9. The Copenhagen head and Rhodian didrachm struck under Nerva compared by superimposing the 3D model of the portrait on the photograph of the coin using a different transparency (Author: Francesca Bologna).

Due to the dimensions, quality, and comparison with the Copenhagen head, the possibility that the sitter was the emperor himself rather than a private individual resembling Nerva must be considered, as both portraits show a similar luxurious and fashionable hairstyle. The two portraits exhibit distinct stylistic features, clearly the result of different workshops, yet they interestingly share common elements, as already mentioned.

No less interesting is the fact that the most accurate comparison of the type of hairstyle is to be found in a portrait from Asia Minor³³.

Literary sources suggest that imperial portraits in the provinces may have varied in appearance, and scholars are still investigating the issue of non-standardisation in provincial portraiture³⁴, whether sculptural or numismatic.

Provincial portraits often show how artists could modify Roman models by applying local stylistic influences. However, it is also relevant to consider the possibility that not every provincial city could ensure that sculptors had access to the latest models. For the local population, inscriptions and sets were the primary factors determining the portrait's identity. It is unlikely that many viewers would have been familiar enough with the subject to recognise specific details such as hairstyles or facial proportions³⁵.

The methodology used here combines the traditional approach of iconographic studies with the use of 3D imaging to understand better the relationship between provincial visual and material culture - coins and portraiture - and their metropolitan models³⁶.

The analysis of the provincial coins clearly shows the extreme variety compared to the Roman model. It thus further confirms that the emperor's image underwent changes as it was received in the provinces.

The Copenhagen head presents a perfect case study on this subject. It bears more than a passing resemblance to Nerva's metropolitan portraits, and it is particularly close to the emperor's profile on coins from Rhodes.

Indeed, it would be safer to assume that the head in Copenhagen represents some prominent individual resembling Nerva. However, given the general variety of this emperor's portraits and the provincial context of production, we must consider that this portrait might depict the emperor himself.

To further support this theory, it is important to remember that a statue of Nerva was indeed set up in Rhodes, as attested by a statue base from the acropolis of Lindos³⁷.

In conclusion, many unanswered questions suggest the need to continue searching and analysing unconventional portrait types produced in the provinces. From this perspective, this paper aims to provide a starting point for a more comprehensive study of the image of Nerva and its variations on coins and sculptures across the empire³⁸.

³³ See above.

³⁴ ZANKER 1983.

³⁵ RICCARDI 2000, pp. 115-118; 130.

³⁶ RESP is applying this methodology to several case studies, and the results will be visible upon the project's completion in 2026:

<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101002763>.

³⁷ HØJTE 2005, 370-371, no. Nerva 37; DEPPMEYER 2008, II, pp. 38-39, n. 11.

³⁸ Within the RESP project, the study of emperor Nerva's representations across the empire is the focus of my in-progress monograph.

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