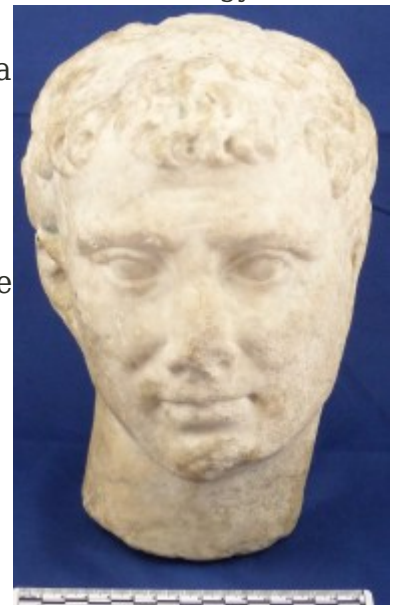


On the morning of 2 March 1995, Anna Mercer (then the Curator of Letchworth Museum) opened an envelope containing a sale catalogue for Robert Room's auction house in Bedford on behalf of Wilson Peacock. It detailed the contents of a sale of material from Wilson Peacock due to take place the next day. One the cover was a photograph of a rather dirty marble portrait head of obviously Roman date. It was lot 358, described as '9 in marble head, believed to be 1st century AD Roman'. It was among a collection of items from a house clearance at Radwell, just north of Baldock.

Anna telephoned the auctioneers to find out more about the head, wondering if it could be a local find. She learned that it had been sent to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford for assessment and that they had examined it over six weeks. Their experts had suggested that it was Roman, dating from the first century AD.

Anna next rang Mark Stevenson of the Museum Service's former Field Archaeology Section to ask for advice. Mark immediately thought of the well-known Scheduled villa site in the village and wondered if there might be a connection with it: had a farm worker uncovered the head during agricultural work such as ditch digging? Anna then rang back the auctioneers to explain that the Museum Service would be interesting in acquiring the sculpture but that it would not be possible to raise money to bid for it. The company agreed to let the buyer know of the Museum's interest in the head, even if just to make a scientific record of it.



On the day of the sale, Mark was able to go to Bedford and inspect the sculpture, just 75 minutes before the auction was due to start. He recognised that it was undoubtedly Roman and that the paint covering it looked like types common in the inter-war years. He noted that it was damaged. There were traces of weathering on the left side and abrasion to the nose, a piece missing from the bottom of the neck, recent damage to the top of the right ear and patches of cement on the top of the head.

In the meantime, Anna contacted the Ashmolean Museum. The expert who had examined the head had recognised that it was most likely to be first-century AD Roman but had not considered that it might have been found in Britain. He instead believed that it was an eighteenth-century import, acquired during an aristocratic Grand Tour. Although he had offered to have the paint cleaned off, the auctioneers had decided against it. There was no paperwork, as all contact with Wilson Peacock had been oral.

The head sold to a private buyer for £2,860 (including the auction room's commission). The auctioneer spoke to the buyer about the museum's interest and it was arranged to lend the sculpture to the museum for three weeks. Mark collected it on 20 March and the next day,

Anna and Jane Read (the illustrator for the Archaeology Section) took it for assessment at Verulamium Museum in St Albans. They brought it back to Letchworth on 24 March. On 4 April, Mark and Jane took the head to the Museum of Classical Archaeology at Cambridge for advice on cleaning. Janet Huskinson examined it there and was able to confirm that it was definitely Roman. The paint covering parts of it (two shades of green, a blue, a yellow and a brown) was a type not used after the 1930s and its distribution suggested that someone had used the head as a brush cleaner! With the permission of the owner, Mark and Jane then took it back to Verulamium Museum for conservation on 6 April. The conservator, Phil Carter, kept notes on the paint and samples. He found that the patches of cement and plaster overlay paint in some places. The paint layers form a distinct sequence, with yellow at the bottom, overlain by green, then blue. The brown overlay the yellow but there was nothing to indicate its relationship with the green or blue layers. He pointed out that the staining on the base of the neck seems to be from a copper alloy, not paint, and that brown marks on either side of the neck are from contact with iron. By 25 April, it was clean, so Mark brought it back to Letchworth. The original buyer agreed to sell it to the museum, and it then entered our collections. Although it was not displayed for some years, it went into a case at Letchworth Museum in 2007 and was chosen to be one of the objects on display in the reception area of North Hertfordshire Museum, where you can now see it.

On 6 March 1995, a member of the team who had done the house clearance telephoned Mark to explain the circumstances of the discovery. He said that the former occupant, a Mr Guest, had lived in the cottage for about twelve years (which would have been about 1982 to 1994) but had entered a retirement home. The caller's son had found the sculpture under a pile of junk in a lean-to outhouse and thought that it must have been there for at least 30 years, well before Mr Guest began renting the property. Further enquiries in the village revealed that before Mr Guest lived there, the tenant had been a Mrs Leaves. Before that, George Calvert had lived there since the late 1920s. He had been the groom for the estate from 1917 onwards and had also worked as a ploughman with the horses he looked after. George Calvert's work, which included maintaining field ditches and even occasionally dredging the River Ivel, provides a plausible context for the discovery of the head. The damage to the chin, nose and left cheek suggests that it has lain low down at the bottom of ploughsoil. However, the experts who first examined this head were mostly dubious about its local origin, preferring to see it as something brought from Europe by an aristocrat who had gone on a Grand Tour. This fails on the grounds that there are no nearby country houses whose owners might have been interested in such 'antiques' and none of the tenants of the cottage since the 1920s worked in such a place. Catherine Johns at the British Museum and Martin Henig of the University of Oxford, though, were more open to the idea that it could have come from the nearby villa.

The head is 236 mm high, 156 mm wide and 187 mm deep, carved from Carrara marble (although not of the best quality as it has some darker veins). The carving is continental in style and involved the use of a drill in places. Several larger drilled holes in the hair may

once have held a gold or bronze laurel wreath, which are most commonly found on late first-century AD sculptures. The shape of the face is wrong for that period, though, as they tend to be squatter in appearance. It is unlikely to date from after the 120s, when carvings include irises and pupils rather than the blank eyes of this piece. The closest parallels seem to be with the Julio-Claudian emperors (from Augustus to Nero, 32 BC to AD 68), specifically with the reign of Tiberius (AD 14-37).

The most similar is a head from Bosham, believed to be of Germanicus (24 May 15 BC-10 October AD 17), nephew of Tiberius, father of Gaius Caligula, brother of Tiberius and grandfather of Nero. He was therefore related to all the Julio-Claudian emperors apart from Augustus. He is also a well-known character in Roman history. His name came from his father, Nero Claudius Drusus (38-9 BC), who died from an infection after falling from his horse in Germany: in recognition of his success, Augustus awarded him the title Germanicus posthumously, which his son inherited. Augustus was anxious about the succession as he had no sons (shades of the English Henry VIII!) and after the premature deaths of his grandsons Gaius (20 BC-AD 4) and Lucius (17 BC-AD 2), he adopted his stepson Tiberius as heir. Before doing so, he made Tiberius adopt Germanicus as his heir, hoping that the young man would eventually become emperor.

Germanicus married Agrippina, Augustus's granddaughter, in AD 5 and the couple had nine children, although three died in infancy. He was appointed a quaestor in AD 7 (four years before the legal minimum age for this official post) and later that year accompanied Tiberius to Pannonia in the Balkans to put down a rebellion. A talented general, he won a significant victory in AD 9 and returned to Rome. In AD 11 he again accompanied Tiberius on campaign, this time in Germany, where they prevented an invasion of Gaul. He returned to Rome and became a Consul in AD 12. The following year, he returned to Germany, this time as commander, and was there when Augustus died the following year. On learning of the emperor's death, the troops revolted for better pay and conditions. Germanicus was able to accede to their demands, deferring to Tiberius. Without permission, he led troops back across the Rhine and over the next two years was able to defeat Arminius (who had defeated Varus in AD 9 and captured three legionary standards) and recover two of the standards. Although this was a popular move, it was strictly illegal. As a result Tiberius recalled him to Rome at the start of AD 17, while still granting him the formal Triumph that his victories had earned.

In AD 17, Germanicus travelled to the eastern part of the empire. He started his work by reorganising the provinces and the troublesome client kingdom of Armenia. He was supposed to work with Piso, the new governor of Syria, but the two men's personalities evidently clashed. Piso refused to send extra troops to Armenia when Germanicus asked for them and replaced officers loyal to Germanicus with men loyal to himself. Germanicus travelled to Egypt (again breaking protocol, as senators such as himself needed the emperor's permission), then returned to Syria, where he found that Piso had overturned many of his earlier orders. He fell ill, convinced that Piso was trying to poison him. He dismissed Piso from his post as governor (again, something he was not authorised to do), formally

renounced their friendship and died shortly afterwards. Piso then returned to Syria (again, this was something a governor who had left his province was not allowed to do). The emperor was forced to investigate Piso's disobedience and deferred the case to the Senate. Although Piso was not found guilty of the murder of Germanicus, the other accusations of insubordination, financial irregularities and fomenting civil war were upheld. Before he could be sentenced, he took his own life.

The later historian Cornelius Tacitus regarded Tiberius as a monster and tried to suggest that he had arranged Germanicus's murder through Piso. This is unlikely on various grounds. After the body was brought back to Rome, Tiberius arranged numerous posthumous honours for his adopted son and delivered a formal eulogy in the Senate house. It is also more likely that Germanicus had contracted a fever while in the east: Piso and his household had left Syria some time before the illness took hold, so there was little opportunity for him to have poisoned Germanicus.

What would the portrait of a successful (if slightly insubordinate) member of the imperial family be doing in Radwell? If Germanicus had died when Britain was a province of the Roman Empire, we might be able to explain it as an imperial gift. For instance, a 'family group' of Claudius comes from the so-called Domus Romana, a high-status house in Rabat, Malta, possibly the official residence of the island's governor. The group has detachable heads, suggesting that they could be replaced with more up-to-date likenesses and even discarded when family members died or fell from favour. The bronze and iron staining at the base of the neck may be indications of how it was attached to a body. If the head is an official portrait, it is unlikely to have been made or presented to anyone after Germanicus's death in AD 19 (or, if a gift from Gaius in commemoration of his father, after the latter's assassination in AD 41).

If it did come from one of the fields of the villa estate, as seems likely, the status of the object raises questions about the status of the site. If the portraits were an official gift, to whom might it have been made? There were no villas in Britain before the conquest of AD 43, but we know so little about the site at Radwell that we cannot rule out earlier activity there. Was it already home to an aristocratic family in the decades before the Roman conquest of AD 43 and a gift from the Emperors Augustus or Tiberius to a local ruler?

Written by Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews

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