



Press Release from Bournemouth University

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21st century scan could reveal rare sculpture of 1st century Roman emperor Nero

Experts from Bournemouth University and the Fishbourne Roman Palace near Chichester are preparing to scan the damaged statue of a boy's head to reveal if it is a rare depiction of Roman Emperor Nero as a youngster.

Dr Rob Symmons, Curator of Archaeology at the Palace site in West Sussex, and Dr Miles Russell, senior lecturer from Bournemouth University, will run 3D scans on the head to recreate the damaged parts of the face. If their theories are correct, the marble head would be the third surviving piece of its kind in the world and particularly rare in Britain where all images of Nero were believed to have been completely destroyed following his suicide in AD68.

Dr Symmons said: "This is very exciting as the scan will allow us to see for the first time what the boy really looked like and may also reveal his identity. We have always assumed he was related to the royal family who lived here at Fishbourne but it may be that it is even more special and is a rare depiction of Nero."

The collaboration between the Fishbourne Palace and Bournemouth University came about after Dr Russell, an expert in Roman archaeology, scanned a similar Roman stone head, currently in Chichester District Museum, and discovered it bore an uncanny resemblance to the emperor.

Dr Russell said: "The Chichester head, though damaged, appeared to have been a depiction of Nero as an older man, a rare survival, as most portraits of the man were destroyed after his suicide following his declaration as an enemy of the State. I wondered whether the famous "head of a youth" in Fishbourne Palace museum might also be of the disgraced emperor."

Two of the best-known examples of the teenage Nero are preserved in the Museo Nazionale d'Antichita in Parma and the Musee du Louvre in Paris. Both representations are thought to have been created as part of the official recognition that Nero was on his way to becoming chief heir of Claudius.

A possible third representation of the teenage Nero may be the "Fishbourne head". The rounded cheeks and full, curving lips of the piece almost exactly match the features of the young Nero on display in Parma and Paris, as do the rounded lower face, slightly protruding ears, curling locks of hair and almond-shaped eyes.

The Fishbourne head has been forcibly removed from the body whilst substantial and violent blows have fragmented the image, further damage being inflicted upon the nose and chin. This seems to follow very closely the process of damnatio memoriae, a post mortem mutilation inflicted upon Nero and everything he was associated with, following his death in AD 68.

The damage caused to the Fishbourne portrait would be totally in line with such an empire-wide practice. Furthermore, the dumping of the smashed fragments of sculpture into the foundations of the main palace, which swept away all trace of the Nero-inspired earlier phase, would probably have been seen as an entirely appropriate fate for the disgraced emperor.

Editor's note: Journalists and photographers are welcome to visit the Fishbourne Roman Palace near Chichester on 15 October to witness the 3D scanning performed by Dr Miles Russell of Bournemouth University.

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Further notes for editors

1. BU is a finalist for 'University of the Year' and 'Research Project of the Year' in *the Times Higher Education (THE) Awards, 2009*.
2. BU is the UK's Number One New University (first place among all institutions that became universities since 1992) according to The Guardian University Guide 2009 & 2010. (www.guardian.co.uk/education)
3. In the 2008 [Research Assessment Exercise](#) (RAE) BU is the fourth most improved university in the UK for the quality of its research (according to *Times Higher Education*).

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