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A NEW ROMAN IMPERIAL PORTRAIT FROM SYEDRA

Abstract: This study examines the marble portrait head of a man unearthed during excavations in the ancient city of Syedra, located in the Alanya district of Antalya in Türkiye. During the excavations of filled soil on the south wall of the *Heroon*, a well-preserved portrait head was found in 2023. Archaeological studies indicate that Syedra has been inhabited since the 9th century BC despite those researches about the city are still insufficient. Therefore, the dating and identification of the portrait found in the city have critical importance. The portrait under examination spans a significant historical period, encompassing the reigns of Roman emperors from Tiberius (14–37 AD) to Nero (54–68 AD). However, a detailed analysis of the work suggests that the portrait may have produced during period of Nero's reign. This dating is important as fewer portraits have been found in Cilicia compared to other parts of Asia Minor in the archaeological excavations carried out so far, and none of them have been dated to the Neronian period. The current study introduces this portrait, offering a comprehensive analysis on its history, identity, and historical significance.

Keywords: *Roman Imperial Period, Asia Minor, Syedra, Portrait, the age of Nero.*

Hasan Ertuğ ERGÜRER

Alaaddin Keykubat University, Turkey
ertiara@yandex.com

Deniz Berk TOKBUDAK

Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University, Turkey
berktokbudak@hotmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The earliest settlement in Syedra dates back to the 9th century BC and was a multicultural city inhabited throughout the Hellenistic, Roman, Late Roman and Byzantine Periods. The city was first discovered in 1891¹ and was intermittently visited by researchers over the following years. In the 1960s archaeologists G.E. Bean and T.B. Mitford conducted epigraphic research in the city.² In 1993, G. Huber drew up a city plan of Syedra based on the available data of the time,³ and studies of the city's history have continued to this day (Map 1).

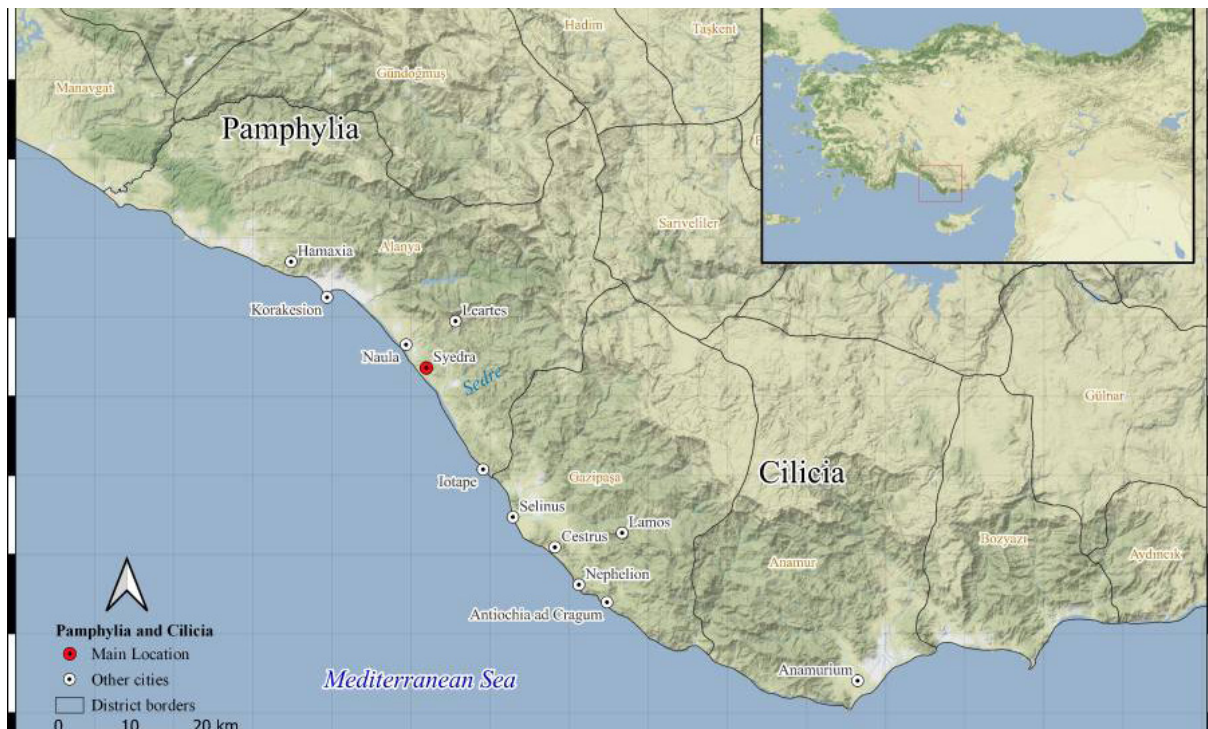
During the 2023 excavation, the stairs connecting the city's West Gate to the Colonnaded Street, a well-preserved portrait head was recovered from the south wall of the *Heroon* (Fig. 1). The artifact lacks contextual information as it was recovered from backfilled soil. Nevertheless, it is very significant as its dating and identity contribute to the research and findings of the city.

The stylistic analysis of the portrait head indicates a broad chronological range spanning the imperial reigns of Tiberius to Nero (AD 14–68). Consequently, this study provides information about the general portraiture characteristics of these two significant periods, examining the historical evidence to pinpoint the most probable origin of the artifact. The results of the detailed analysis reveal that the portrait head is more likely to belong to the

¹ HEBERDEY/WILHELM 1896, 141 f.

² BEAN/MITFORD 1970, 106 f.

³ HUBER 1993.



Map 1.

Neronian Period, and thus represents the first example of such portraiture in Cilicia from this period.

Sculptures from the Roman Imperial Period are scarcer in Cilicia than in other provinces of Asia Minor, and studies on statues in Cilicia are also limited. The most detailed study to date is probably A. Çalik's doctoral dissertation on Roman Imperial sculpture in Cilicia.⁴ Çalik analyzed 258 sculptures, including artifacts sent from archaeological excavations to be exhibited in museums, collections, and sculptures of undetermined context. None of these works were dated to the reign of Nero.⁵ The only Nero portrait in her catalogue (No. 161) is now in the Louvre Museum. The original location of this portrait is unclear, however, with its chronology postdating the reign of Nero.⁶

Other scholarly works primarily consist of museum catalogs and dissertations based on these catalogs. Notably, no portraits from the Neronian Period have been identified in regional museums such as Antalya, Alanya, Adana, Tarsus, and Silifke.⁷ This study aims to introduce the portrait in question and provide information regarding its history and the place of discovery.

Syedra

Positioned approximately 20 km from the Alanya district in Antalya province, Syedra was an ancient city situated on a slope 400 m above the sea level. This elevated location provided Syedra and its inhabitants with strategic advantage in terms of security throughout history, allowing a wide area to be controlled from Alanya (Korakesion) to Mahmutlar

(Nauloi?) in the west, and from the coast of Gazipaşa (Selinus/Traianopolis) and Demirtaş in the east (Map 1).

Syedra was located at the intersection of Pamphylia and Cilicia, experiencing fluid regional boundaries throughout its history; therefore, it was classified within different regions, including Pamphylia and Cilicia. The city was also part of the Isaura Region for a time. It has been argued that habitation in Syedra began in the 9th century BC, based on the ceramics of Cilicia and Cyprus.⁸ An inscription found at Syedra indicates that Syedra was plundered by piracy in the early 1st century BC and consulted the oracle of Apollo of Claros for guidance.⁹ The danger of pirates in the region was ultimately addressed and eliminated by Pompeius Magnus in 67 BC.¹⁰

A long period of peace began on the southern coast of Asia Minor after the turmoil during the Roman civil wars. Early in this period, during the reign of Emperor Tiberius, Syedra became the first city to mint its own coins in the region.¹¹ The reverse of the coins bore the legends "CYEΔPE/Syedre" or "CYEΔPEΩN-CYEΔPEΩN/Syedreon".¹²

Syedra and its surroundings experienced a period of peace and prosperity that prevailed throughout the empire in the 2nd century AD. Construction activities had increased and most of the magnificent buildings in Syedra were built during this time. Many games were organized in Cilicia during this period of prosperity. The majority of inscriptions related to these games (agons) were found in Syedra, which testifies to the important role the city played in athletic competition in the region. Most of the inscriptions found in Syedra mention the agons and the names of the prize winners.¹³ The

⁴ ÇALIK 1997.

⁵ See ÇALIK 1997, 107 f.

⁶ ÇALIK 1997, 69; ZANKER 1983, 22–23.

⁷ ÇALIK 1997, 107; KILINÇ 2012, 26–108; DEMİRER ET AL. 2005, 74–122; TEPEBAŞ/DURUGÖNÜL 2013, 72–82; TEPEBAŞ 2016, 72–77.

⁸ ERGÜRER 2024, 53–54.

⁹ DE SOUZA 1997, 477–481.

¹⁰ HUBER 1993, 41.

¹¹ BEAN/MITFORD, 1962, 192.

¹² GÜZEL 2018, 86–136.

¹³ HUBER 1993, 42.

coinage of Syedra ends in the 3rd century AD, a little later than in other cities, during the reign of Gallienus.¹⁴

From the coastal regions spanning Pamphylia, Isauria, and Cilicia, only six cities – Perge, Magydos, Aspendos, Syedra, Antioch, and Tarsus participated in the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. During the council, Syedra was written as a city in Isauria. Bishop Nestor represented Syedra at the Council of Nicaea, while the city was represented by Bishop Gaus in the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. The region experienced a period of prosperity that began in the second half of the 4th century AD and intensified in the 5th century AD. New buildings and churches were built during this period of prosperity. However, this period abruptly came to an end with a second Sassanid attack, which destroyed Antioch and the eastern part of Cilicia. Immediately after the Sassanid attacks, Arab raids began in which they sacked all the cities *en route* to capturing Constantinople in AD 677/678.

Bishop George from Syedra attended the council meeting held in Constantinople in AD 692 when the city was included in the provincial list of Pamphylia. During the First Crusade (AD 1096–1099), Syedra experienced a maritime and coastal revival. However, Syedra's absence in the regional fortress records may be due to the city's diminished urban scale, reduced connection to the coast, and its challenging maritime access. Regardless, Syedra continued to be mentioned in episcopal lists until the 12th century AD.¹⁵ The last traces of settlement in the city from the 9th century BC onwards are the few Anatolian Seljuk ceramics. During this period, Syedra may again have served as an outpost fortress providing security for Alanya Castle, due to its location.

EXTANT CONDITION AND PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The marble head was unearthed during excavations on the south wall of the *Heroon* in Syedra. Carved in slightly rough yellowish marble, the head is 32.5 cm. high, 16 cm. wide, and 14 cm. thick. Excluding the neck, the head measures 25.5 cm. and the forehead width is 4.5 cm. With these dimensions, the artifact is slightly larger than a normal adult human's head. The lower part of the head is missing from the base of the neck. There is slight but wide-ranging damage on the surface. The hair is parted in the middle, worn on the right and left sides, and it is generally not voluminous or wavy. The damage to the portrait is more visible on the ears: The left ear is detached and the right is significantly damaged, yet the earlobe is intact. The lips, eyes, eyebrows, and cheeks are slightly damaged, while the back of the head is intact. Overall, the portrait is well preserved.

The oval head tilted slightly to the left, depicts a young, slightly fuller-faced man with a thin beard and long sideburns, descending below the chin and merging without touching the cheeks or under lips. He does not have a moustache. The forehead is smooth, and the eyebrows are thin, long, and curved. Eyes are large with thin eyelids, and there is no infraorbital swelling (i.e., undereye bags). Pupils and irises are not carved and the eye sockets are deep and

prominent. Considering the nose, is arched, thick, and narrow-winged. There is no trace of *nasolabial* lines. The mouth is small, the lips are thick and slightly spaced apart. The chin is round and compact. The cheekbones are not emphasized as the face is generally puffy, but there are prominent jowls. The hair tresses are arranged neatly in a half-moon shape on the scalp without covering the ears. The hair completely covers the nape of the neck; it is in the shape of a half-moon on the forehead and wavy to the right and left, forming a motif of a fork and clamp in the center of the forehead. The clamp motif is important because it covers a large area extending beyond the center of the forehead as an exaggerated reflection of the fashion of the period, reflecting the sculptor's preference.

STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Unfortunately, there is no excavation context or epigraphic data since the head was excavated from backfilled soil. Therefore, it can only be dated based on stylistic characteristics. As the portrait is well preserved, there are sufficient examples to allow for a stylistic dating approach. In estimating its date, the analysis considered portraits of imperial dynasty members, emperors, and similar private portraits from the era.

The physical characteristics of the portrait suggest a wide range of dates spanning the reigns of the emperors Tiberius and Nero (AD 14–68). Emperor Tiberius was Augustus' stepson and successor, reigned from AD 14 to 37. His portraits closely resemble to those of Emperor Augustus, as Tiberius wanted to reflect his father-son relationship. Tiberius became emperor at the age of 56; however, the statues of his early years depict him as a young man. It is thought that the new ruler's emulation of his predecessor played a role in this preference. The depiction of hair in portraits of Tiberius is also a reference to the Augustan period and indicates his connection with his predecessor.¹⁶ Accordingly, it does not seem possible to compare the portraits of Emperor Tiberius with the Syedra portrait. However, the same is not true for other Julio-Claudian members of the Tiberian Period. For example, portraits of princes from this period, like that of the Syedra, were depicted with thin beards and have been found in various provinces throughout the empire. The portrait of Germanicus, currently on display in the Archaeological Museum of Tripoli (North Africa), resembles the Syedra portrait in terms of its thin beard style.¹⁷ However, his face is thinner, and his hair does not completely cover the nape of the neck, as in the Syedra portrait. Similar examples are seen in the princes of the Corinth-Stuttgart type. The princes were depicted with thin sideburn-style beards.¹⁸ Portraits of the Corinth-Stuttgart type are also found in Ephesus, the capital of Asia Minor. Germanicus visited Asia Minor between AD 17 and 18 and probably stopped in Ephesus.¹⁹ Germanicus, his adopted brother Drusus Minor and emperor Tiberius were honored with statues by the *demos* and the *neoi* of the

¹⁴ HUBER 1993, 42–43.

¹⁵ HUBER 1993, 43, 44.

¹⁶ KLEINER 1992, 123–124.

¹⁷ ROSE 1997, 182–184, Cat. 125.

¹⁸ LENAGHAN/LORDOĞLU 2023, 47 f.

¹⁹ TACĪTUS, *Annales*. 2.54; LENAGHAN/LORDOĞLU 2023, 50.

city.²⁰ Here, the most obvious similarity between the Syedra portrait and those of the princes is their beards. However, this feature is not sufficient alone to date the Syedra portrait.

Examination of the Tiberian Period portraits shows that they have limited similarities with the Syedra portrait. The most distinctive shared characteristic is the presence of thin side-burn style beards in the prince portraits from this period. This feature disappeared during the reigns of Tiberius' successors, Gaius Caligula (AD 37–41) and Nero Claudius Caesar (AD 54–68),²¹ making Nero's reign the only period in which the beard was prevalent.

The most important similarity between the Syedra portrait with that of Nero, the last emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, is his thin beard. Sculptural works and numismatic evidence suggest that Nero had at least four portrait types.²² In his portraits, the representation spans from childhood to the last years of his reign. In the first portrait type, Nero is depicted at the age of 13. His straight hair falls forward and is slightly parted in the center.²³ The second type, known as the Cagliari type, portrays Nero as a young man.²⁴ In AD 59, a new type of portrait appears to commemorate his fifth year of reign (*quinquennium Neronis*). Compared to the two previous portraiture types, the new version shows Nero with a heavier-set face and differently combed locks of hair above the forehead.

His hair is half-moon-shaped, thick, and combed to the left, significantly covering the forehead. The beard is thin, extending down from the sideburns, merging under the chin. The hair covers the nape of the neck well and falls downward.²⁵ The eye sockets are deep and prominent. The fourth and final portrait type of Nero was produced to commemorate the tenth year of his reign. The emperor's face is swollen and rounded from aging. His eyes have become very small and deeply sunken. The locks of hair are arranged side by side, as in the third type, and fluff outwards to the left.²⁶ In this portrait type, the emperor is depicted without a beard. In the first two portrait types, Nero is depicted as a child and a young man. For this reason, he has no features that are similar to the Syedra portrait that shows Nero at a more mature age. In the third type of portrait, some of Nero's features are similar to the Syedra portrait, including a slightly fuller face, a smooth forehead, thin eyelids, large eyes, and thin, long, and curved eyebrows. There is also a lack of emphasis on the cheekbones due to the puffiness of the face, the regular placement of the hair, covering the nape of the neck from behind, and the beard in the form of thin sideburns.

Some of the private portraits dating to the reign of Nero in Asia Minor bear the same characteristics as the more mature emperor. The first example is the portrait of a youth in the Edirne Museum. The face is slightly fuller and oval. The forehead is smooth. The hair is regularly arranged and long enough to cover the nape of the neck.²⁷ Another portrait

purchased by the Alanya Museum in 1975 depicts a young man with a full, soft, and oval face. The work is reminiscent of the portrait in Edirne with its stylistic features.²⁸ The stylistic criticism indicates that the portrait found in Syedra examined within the scope of the study has similar characteristics to the third portrait type of Nero. Accordingly, the artifact was probably sculptured between AD 59 and 64.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND IDENTIFICATION OF THE PORTRAIT

Technical features are not the only criteria for dating the Syedra portrait. Historical data, archaeological data, and architectural insights can also be examined to interpret the portrait found in Syedra. The Tiberian Period holds particular significance for Asia Minor. Tiberius was the stepson and successor of Augustus, ruling between AD 14 and 37 following the death of his stepfather. Ancient sources report that the emperor as frugal, warned governors who exploited the provinces. Tiberius continued the new policy that had begun under Augustus, which favored the development of cities in the provinces.²⁹ Cassius Dio conveys the emperor's attitude with an anecdote: *In fact, when Aemilius Rectus once sent him from Egypt, which he was governing, more money than was stipulated, he sent back to him the message: I want my sheep shorn, not shaven.*³⁰ The emperor's protective attitude towards provinces must have had a positive effect on the cities of Asia Minor. Numismatic studies conducted so far have revealed that the city minted coins as early as the Tiberian Period.³¹ A severe earthquake struck Asia Minor during the reign of Tiberius and destroyed many major cities. In the disaster's aftermath, Tiberius provided financial aid and postponed taxes to help the cities of Asia recover.³² Coins were minted in honor of the emperor's generosity, and a temple was dedicated to him in Smyrna.³³ Tiberius' reign was embraced in Cilicia as he was honored as a *savior* in the *Heroon* of Olba.³⁴ For this reason, although it does not offer sufficient stylistic features, the Tiberian Period could have been considered if this artifact was not dated to the period of Nero.

The Neronian period was equally significant for Asia Minor though historical narratives have been significantly distorted by sensationalist ancient sources like Suetonius and Cassius Dio. Contemporary biographies of Nero suggest a more nuanced interpretation of Nero's reign, challenging the negative perceptions.³⁵ Indeed, Nero was remarkably popular, especially in Asia Minor, so much so that following his death, the first fake Nero appeared in Asia Minor, causing great upheaval in the region. The fake Nero was soon captured and executed, and his body was displayed in cities

²⁰ LENAGHAN/LORDOĞLU 2023, 50–52.

²¹ KIENAST/ECK/HEİL 2017, 65.

²² BERGMANN 2013, 332.

²³ BERGMANN 2013, 332–333.

²⁴ ÖZGAN 2013, 259.

²⁵ KLEINER 1992, 138.

²⁶ ÖZGAN 2013, 262.

²⁷ ÖZGAN 2013, 266, Fig. 181a-b.

²⁸ ÖZGAN 2013, 268, Fig. 183a-b.

²⁹ The most important physical example of the policy pursued in the provinces during the Augustan period is manifested in building activities. For more information, see MACMULLEN 1959, 207–235 and MITCHELL 1987, 333–365.

³⁰ CASSIUS DIO, *Historia Romana*, 57.10.5.

³¹ GÜZEL 2018, 28.

³² CASSIUS DIO, *Historia Romana*, 57.17.7; TACITUS. *Annales*. 2.47.1.

³³ SHOTTER 2004, 63–64.

³⁴ MACKAY 1968, 107; ÇALIK 1997, 27.

³⁵ DRINKWATER 2019; MALİTZ 1999; WALDHERR 2005; SHOTTER 2008.

across Asia Minor. His body was then taken to Rome to avoid any suspicion.³⁶ A second false Nero, Terentius Maximus, also appeared in Asia Minor during the reign of Titus (AD 79–81). Maximus, who resembled Nero in his appearance and hobbies, managed to gather supporters in Asia Minor and attempted to replace Titus by making an agreement with Artabanus, one of the Parthian rebel leaders. However, he was soon captured and turned over to the Romans.³⁷ A notable point here is that while Titus was renowned among Romans as the *darling of mankind*,³⁸ the potential for rebellion during the reign of such a popular emperor underlines the profound and enduring influence of Nero, which cannot be underestimated. The most significant concrete data to strengthen this discourse is probably the relief of Nero in Aphrodisias. Indeed, despite the decision of *damnatio memoriae* against the emperor, the relief in question was left untouched.³⁹ Therefore, it is not surprising to find portraits of Nero in Asia Minor.

Examples of artifacts from the Neronian period have been found in various cities throughout Asia Minor, and specific portraits have been mentioned above. Additionally, portraits of Nero have also been found in Asia Minor. One such portrait was found in Stratonikeia (Caria) and is on display in the Izmir Archaeological Museum. The portrait with a slightly heavy oval face and a set mass of hair, which flows down to the nape of the neck, is thought to depict Nero.⁴⁰ Another portrait head thought to have come from Cilicia is now on display in the Louvre Museum. The work was identified by L. Curtius as M. Antonius.⁴¹ However, R. Özgan stated that it might belong to the Late Hellenistic-Roman Late Republican period or early Augustus period at the latest.⁴² On the other hand, J. Inan, E. Rosenbaum, and P. Zanker have argued that the portrait depicts Nero.⁴³ P. Zanker attributes the work's difference from the known portrait types of Nero to the sculptor's familiarity with Nero's earlier and later portraits and the production of a homogeneous work.⁴⁴ The private portraits dating to the Roman Imperial Period are closely related to the artistic understanding of the emperors and their dynasties. Thus, the rulers had a significant influence on the shaping of private portraits as art could change based on periods. For example, the portraits produced during the reigns of the Julio-Claudians, the Flavian and the Antonines exhibit distinct stylistic characteristics. These official portraits of the emperors and their families were distributed to all provinces across the vast empire, serving as visual examples that influenced local artists' representations.⁴⁵ The emerging conclusion is that the archaeological and historical data from the Neronian period are in harmony. Nero's popularity in Asia Minor was reflected both in his self-portraits and in private portraits of the period, and thus, the portrait

found in Syedra must also be a reflection of this with its stylistic features.

Unfortunately, an important question that needs to be answered, but is difficult due to the portrait's lack of archaeological context, is who the portrait might belong to. There is no inscribed pedestal that gives us a clue, nor any epigraphic data that can be associated with the artifact. The only available data are the two Nike statues and other sculptural fragments found with the artifact. That the sculptural artifacts were found close to each other, as if they were stacked, despite the fact that they came out of the backfill soil, suggests that they may have been moved to the south wall of the heroon from where they were found at some point in the past. Accordingly, the possibility that the artifact may belong to the *Heroon* should not be disregarded. If so, the artifact may have been one of the benefactors of the city and may have been rewarded with a statue for his contribution to the city. And there is indeed a similar example in the *heroon* of Knidos.⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

There are various recently-discovered sculptural works reflecting the artistic understanding of the period of the ancient city of Syedra, and the very well preserved portrait examined in this study is one of them. Due to its stylistic characteristics, the portrait was initially dated to a broad chronological range, but after further analysis, its origin was pinpointed to the specific period of Nero's reign. This determination is important as in the archaeological excavations carried out in Cilicia so far, fewer portraits have been found compared with other parts of Asia Minor, and none of them have been dated to the age of Nero. The portrait, most likely representing a young man from one of Syedra's wealthy families or their son, has been dated to AD 59–64 based on distinctive stylistic features.

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³⁶ TACĪTUS, *Histories*. 2.8.

³⁷ CASSIUS DĪO, *Historia Romana*, 66.19.3.

³⁸ SUETONIUS, *Titus*. 1.1.

³⁹ SMĪTH 2013, 71–78.

⁴⁰ ÖZGAN 1995, 91–93.

⁴¹ CURTĪUS 1939, 118.

⁴² ÖZGAN 2013, 268–269.

⁴³ İNAN/ROSENBAUM 1979, No. 36; ZANKER 1983, 22–23.

⁴⁴ ZANKER 1983, 23.

⁴⁵ ÖZGAN 2022, 4.

⁴⁶ TOSUNLAR *et alii* 2022, 65.

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Fig. 1.



Fig. 2. Nero, Portrait type 3, Rome Museo Palatino (After Bergmann)



Fig. 3.