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## SKYLAX. A GEM CARVER IN POLITICS

**Summary:** The Tarragona Museum is in possession of a gem engraved with a satyr-citharode dressed as Hercules (Nr. 7543). The gem, according to the inscription, is the work of Scylax, an engraver at the court of Claudius and Nero. With the figure of the satyr-citharode, Scylax expressed his disapproval of Nero, the tyrant who proclaimed himself a great sportsman and artist.

**Key words:** Skylax, Nero, Claudius, intaglio, cameo, gemma, portraits of Nero.



Fig. 1

In the collection of the Museu Nacional Arqueològic de Tarragona is an amethyst intaglio, [17x14,5 mm], inv. 7543.<sup>1</sup> On the stone can be seen the engraved figure of a naked male with cithara, who is identified as Hercules by the lion skin thrown over his shoulder and dangling down to front and back. Behind his back an inscription of eight Greek letters can be made out. (Fig. 1) The stone was first displayed in public at the 1893 Barcelona World's Fair. The amethyst intaglio was first published by the doctor Augustí M. Gibert y Olivé in 1900.<sup>2</sup> His enthusiastic, if unfounded interpretation dated the gem to the Hellenistic period, and identified the master, on the basis of his signature, as Skyllis of Crete. Gibert y Olivé's false reading (CKΛVVKOC) and his identification of the figure

<sup>1</sup> RICOMÀ, R. M.: *Les gemmes del Museu Nacional Arqueològic de Tarragona*. Tarragona, 1982. 39. Núm. 10. “Núm. Inventari General: 7543. Material: Ametista. Translúcida. 0,018x0,0021 m. Forma: Convexa 8 A. Superficie polida. Tema: Herakles Musagetes. Té una inscripció amb motius grecs: CKΛVVKOC. Estil: Classicista. S. I-II d.C. Procedència: Pedrera del Port de Tarragona. Observacions: Ingressada el 20 novembre de 1915.”

<sup>2</sup> GIBERT Y OLIVÉ, A. M.: *Ciutats focenses del litoral cosetá*. Barcelona, 1900. 28–30: “Digne de figurar en las riquíssimas collections dels més notables museus estrangers, com moltas altres de variats tamanys, formes y colors, és la pedra grabada, extreta de la mateixa capa y en los indrets del mateix portal que exhibirem en l'Exposició d'indumentaria retrospectiva de Barcelona (1893): vuydat sobre una ovalada pedra d'una sola tinta (amatista), de 27 millimetres d'alçaria per 17 d'amplaria, veuse en posa natural pulçant la lira un hermosíssim Hercules musagetes d'execució la més delicada, ab la particularitat de portar á la dreta la firma del grabador CKΛVVKOC. Concepció plàstica d'exquisita elegància y pulimentada ab lo més gran cuidado (Plini: Hist. Nat., llibre XXXVII.), que deu atribuirse, si no als millors temps del període macedònic, á la proximitat de la radiant expansió d'eixos artístichs treballs.”

with Hercules was adopted by Rosa M. Ricomà in her 1982 catalogue of the Museu Nacional Arqueològic de Tarragona.<sup>3</sup> The citharode cannot, however, be Heracles, since he obviously has goats' feet instead of human feet. Between the feet of the figure dressed in Heracles' lionskin cape, advancing with right foot forward, the stone has suffered damage; a small piece has broken away, presumably when the gem was removed from its original setting. The left foot is thus lost, but the original surface is preserved on the right, and there is no foot to be seen there, the space is enough only for a hoof. Which is to say that, despite the attributes characteristic of Hercules, the figure cannot be identified with the hero himself, but is rather a satyr dressed as Hercules. The motif is not unknown in Greek vase-painting; we meet with it first on a fragment of the Kleophrades Painter, who draws a satyr dressed in a Hercules costume, playing on the aulos.<sup>4</sup> According to Boardman the subject of Heracles the musician was adopted by writers of satyr-drama, and in this way gave birth to the iconographic type of the musician-satyr in Hercules-costume. The motif then spread during the Hellenistic period, arriving finally at Rome, possibly through the mediation of the South Italian Greeks. The iconographic type appearing on the tarragona gem is thus not at all special; much more interesting is the fact that the correct reading of the master's signature CKYΛAKOC. Gibert és Ricomà apparently did not notice that the inscription – as is customary on gems – is in fact in mirror-writing, and simply read the letters upside-down.

Gisela Richter in her magisterial monographic treatment of ancient glyptics lists three other works by the gem-engraver Skylax, who was active in the first century A.D., probably in Rome.<sup>5</sup>

No. 691. Head of Claudius. Hermitage. (Amethyst intaglio, mounted in an ancient gold ring. 17x14.5 mm) (Fig. 2)

No. 692. Herakles playing the cithara. Once in the collection of Baron Roger. Paris. (Sardonyx cameo. 34x23 mm) (Fig. 3)

No. 693. Satyr. Present location not known. (Onyx intaglio. 13x16 mm) (Fig. 4)

The three stones are linked by the fact that all share the signature of the master. He used the genitive of his name (CKVΛAKOC) on the portrait of Claudius and the Heracles citharode; on the gem with the dancing satyr the nominative (CKVΛΑΞ). There is widespread agreement in the literature that Skylax was in fact active in the time of Claudius,<sup>6</sup> and in fact cite the gem in question as an example of the way in

<sup>3</sup> Cf. n. 1.

<sup>4</sup> BOARDMAN, J.: *Herakles. Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*. IV. 1. Zürich-München, 1988. 816: "A satyr dressed as H. and playing the pipes on a fragment by the Kleophrades Painter (Acr. 730; ARV2 186, 42; Graef/Langlotz II pl. 58; Buschor, E., *Satyrtänze* [1943] fig. 59) suggests that the motif of a musical H. was taken up in a satyr play ..." "This motif, which recalls the bf. 1454, appears also on gems (1456–1458), and the type on gems persists in Roman studios, to which some examples cited may belong, but it is clear that it was established in Hellenistic Greece."

<sup>5</sup> RICHTER, G. M. A.: *Engraved Gems of the Romans. A Supplement to the History of Roman Art. The Engraved Gems of the Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans. Part II*. London, 1971. 134.

<sup>6</sup> VOLLENWEIDER, M.-L.: *Die Steinschneidekunst und ihre Künstler in spätrepublikanischer und augusteischer Zeit*. Baden-Baden, 1966. 79: "Als ein Künstler, der ganz gewiß für Claudius gearbeitet hat, kann Skylax genannt werden." ZAZOFF, P.: *Die antiken Gemmen. Handbuch der Archäologie*. Mün-

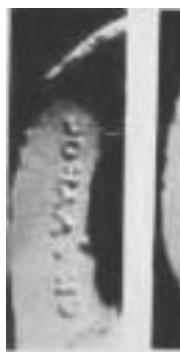


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

which gems, difficult to date for the most part, can at times be placed with considerable chronological accuracy.<sup>7</sup> Vollenweider has written that the portrait must be dated to the reign of Claudius, since it shows the emperor wearing the aegis, that is to say, in the role of Jupiter, a type seen also on portraits of Augustus and Tiberius.<sup>8</sup> Such a portrait is, however, unthinkable for Claudius both under his predecessors – since he was considered quite mad before his accession to the throne –, and under his successors, when Seneca and Nero were hard at work blackening his reputation. Vollenweider for his part goes even further, attributing the Claudius-apotheosis cameo in Paris to the master, along with the cornucopia cameo in Vienna.<sup>9</sup> These cameos are unsigned; hence we will not take account of either, despite the fact that they exemplify the highest artistic quality of the Claudian period, nor will we discuss the unsigned portrait of a boy in Auerberg, attributed to Skylax by P. Zazoff. The dating of the Heracles eitharode cameo to the reign of Nero is also quite uncertain. Marie-Louise Vollenweider and Peter Zazoff are however unanimous to this effect; Boardman lists the dating without commentary, but in inverted commas: “Vollenweider:

chen, 1983. 321: “Zeitlich gesichert ist der Steinschneider Skylax, sein prachtvoller Amethyst trägt das Porträt des Claudius (41–54 n.Chr.).” 79. N. 78.: „

<sup>7</sup> GUIRAUD, H.: *Intailles et camées Romains*. Paris, 1996. 81: “Dans certaines cas, le chemin suivi par des intailles est repérable. On peut mettre à part les cas aussi exceptionnels qu’une améthyste signée Skylax figurant le portrait de l’empereur Claude retrouvé en Crimée ou une pierre signée Platon, graveur de Haut Empire.”

<sup>8</sup> VOLLENWEIDER 1966, 79. N. 78: “Der Stein ist schon deshalb in die Zeit des Claudius zu datieren, als auf ihm der Kaiser selber mit der Ägis in der Art des Augustus und Tiberius wie Iupiter dargestellt ist.” VOLLENWEIDER besides this also attributes to Scylax two small busts made about AD 81 (*Catalogue raisonné des sceaux, cylindres, intailles et camées. Vol. II. Les portraits, les masques de théâtre, les symbols politiques*. Musée d’Art et Histoire de Genève. Mainz am Rhein, 1979. No. 227–228; planches 67–68.), P. ZAZOFF 339. a portrait of a boy found in Auerberg, and dated to AD 20–50: “Eine durch ihren Fund auf dem Auerberg auf die Jahzehnte 20–50 n.Chr. datierte amethystfarbene Glaspaste mit der Profilbüste eines lockigen Knaben geht in der Tat gut mit dem Claudius des Skylax zusammen ... anstelle der losen Haarbandenden sieht man einige Knoten der Herakleskeule hinter dem Nacken; vielleicht handelt es sich um einen claudischen Prinzen als Herkules.”

<sup>9</sup> VOLLENWEIDER 1966. 79. N. 78: “Der Cameo mit dem Leier spielenden Herakles mag dagegen schon in der Zeit Neros gehören.” ZAZOFF 1983. 321. N. 99: “Der Kameo mit dem Herakles als Kitharöde mag schon neronisch sein.”

«neronisch».<sup>10</sup> Of the three gems, only the Claudius portrait in the Hermitage can today be studied. The whereabouts of the dancing satyr and the Heracles citharodes are unknown. The latter was in the possession of Senator Tiepolo, the Venetian collector, in 1724 (Figs. 5–6); in 1841 it belonged to the parisian collection of the baron Roger, but was not included in the catalogue at the time the collection was auctioned in 1904.<sup>11</sup> The stone was, it seems, already lost at that time. A. Furtwängler published a photograph of the gem in his article of 1888. The disappearance of the gem can thus be dated between 1888 and 1904. The iconography is especially interesting, since Heracles is rarely shown as a musician, and images of him as citharode are even rarer. According to Boardman the motif cannot be explained with appeal to a particular cult; what is more, the name “*mousikos*” was attributed to the type by modern researchers, nor do the myths provide a secure ground for the creation of the type, since Heracles’ musical education was only superficial.<sup>12</sup> Since the earliest images of Heracles Mousikos appear on Attic vases of the Peisistratid period, they must relate to some sort of innovation in the musical life of the time. The exact date of the motif’s appearance in Roman art is known exactly. The cult of Heracles Mousagetes, who, as “leader of the muses”, was in some sense a replacement for Apollo, was introduced to Rome by the victorious general M. Fulvius Nobilior from Ambracia in the year 189 BC (Plin. NH 35, 66).<sup>13</sup> The general set up the statues of the muses plundered from Ambracia in the temple he built next to the Circus Flaminius. The temple was rebuilt under Augustus by L. Marcius Philippus, probably according to Augustus’ own intentions, as Suetonius alludes in his biography of the princeps (29, 8): “*Multaque a multis extracta sunt, sicut a Marcio Philippo aedes Hercules Musarum ...*” It must have been natural for a ruler who had committed himself to a renovation of the ancient traditional cults and the arts to take this temple and its cult, so congenial to his own program, and a monument to past glorious victories, into his care. To explain the origin of Skylax’s Hercules entirely on this basis, namely by appeal to the cult of Hercules Musarum, supported also by Augustus, would be to risk serious error. If we assume as a working hypothesis that Vollenweider and Zazzoff were right in making of Skylax a “court artist” under Claudius, and if we accept that the Hercules gem was engraved already under Nero, we can easily understand how naturally the motif of Heracles mousikos, which was already two hundred years old, if never very popular, could have seemed to a court artist working under Nero. The portrayal of rulers as Heracles was an everyday phenomenon already in the Hel-

<sup>10</sup> VOLLENWEIDER 1966, 79. N. 78.

<sup>11</sup> STOSCH, F.: *Gemmae antiqueae caelatae, sculptorum nominibus insignitae*. Amsterdam 1724. Tab. LIX: “Hercules Musarum Scylaxis opus.” VOLLENWEIDER 1966, 79. N. 78.

<sup>12</sup> BOARDMAN *LIMC* IV. 1. 816: “The inspiration for this important though restricted (in time and place) series cannot be in cult (the epithet *mousikos* is applied by modern scholars not antiquity), nor can it be in myth since his education in music was incomplete. Given the special role that H. seems to play in the Athens of Peisistratos and his sons it is likely that musical H. reflects some innovation in the musical life of Athens under the tyrants ...”

<sup>13</sup> BOARDMAN *LIMC* IV. 1, 811. On coins struck by Q. Pomponius Musa we find the inscription “Hercules Musarum” (*LIMC* IV. 1482). RITTER, S.: *Hercules in der römischen Kunst von den Anfängen bis Augustus*. Heidelberg 1995. 32–35.

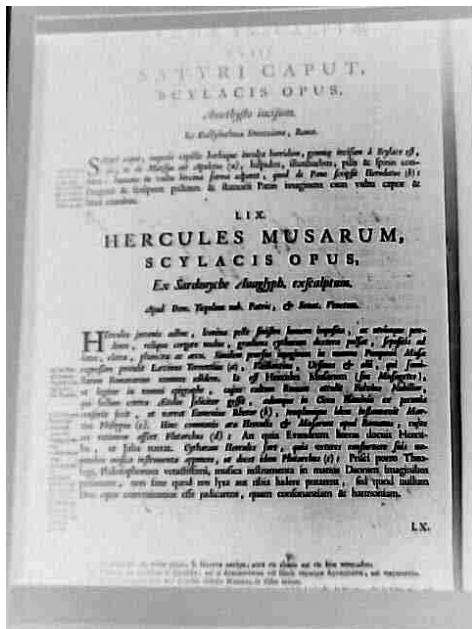


Fig. 5

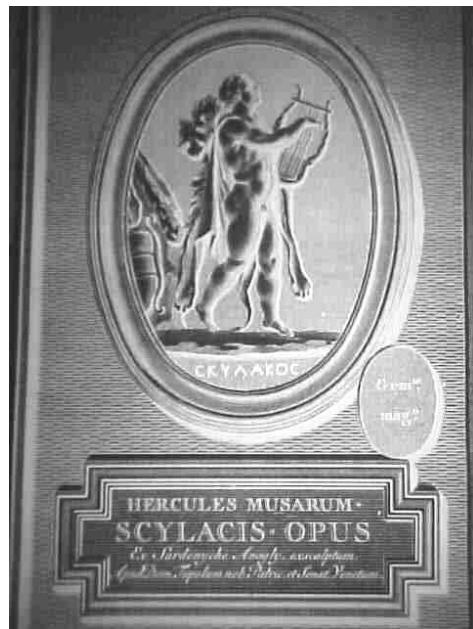


Fig. 6

lenistic period, as U. Huttner's recent monograph emphatically reminds us.<sup>14</sup> Among Roman emperors and princes who donned the grab of Heracles – with the exception of the prince of the Claudian period identified by Zazoff – it is worthwhile to mention Caracalla's portrayal as the child-Heracles strangling the snakes,<sup>15</sup> and the Esquiline Commodus in full Hercules costume. It is also worthwhile to mention that Commodus was the victim of what can only be described as a real Hercules mania.<sup>16</sup>

After the death of Claudius Seneca celebrated the young Nero as Apollo in his Apocolocynthisis, and in which poem Apollo himself compares the singing and appearance of the young prince to his own (Apocolocynthisis 4):

*Phoebus ait 'vincat mortalis tempora vitae  
ille mihi similis vultu similisque decore  
nec cantu nec voce minor.'*

„Apollo  
spoke: «Let him conquer the span of mortal life:  
the boy is like to me in face and like in form,  
nor less in song or voice»”

<sup>14</sup> HUTTNER, U.: *Die politische Rolle der Heraklesgestalt im griechischen Herrschertum*. Historia Einzelschriften 112. Stuttgart, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> KLEINER, D. E. E.: *Roman Sculpture*. New Haven, London, 1992. 323.

<sup>16</sup> KLEINER 277: “The *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* reports that Commodus was found of donning the attributes of Hercules in public and that he saw himself as a god on earth (S. H. A., Comm., 14, 8). The imperial coinage of 191–92, a widely circulated means of expressing public policy, also depicts Commodus in the guise of Heracles.” HEKSTER, O.: *Commodus. An Emperor at the Crossroads*. Amsterdam, 2002.

It is clear that this divine attention is to be explained by Nero's very high-flown poetic ambitions, to his public performances where he sang and accompanied himself on the cithara. Naturally enough, all of this contributed to the expectations of a Golden Age which accompanied Nero's accession to power, and which Seneca did his best to promote. The Apollo simile was literally flogged to death by the sycophants of the court.<sup>17</sup> It is true however that Nero, like Commodus had another rather less Apollonian character, of which he was inordinately proud: his image of himself as a sportsman. He actually took part in competitions and even managed to win, even if only at the cost of extraordinary cheating. This proves, however, that for Nero his physical performance was as important as his poetic and musical talent. If someone wished to entrust a court engraver trained under Claudius with the task of carving a cameo which would win Nero's liking, he could not have found a better subject than Hercules as citharode, who combined, as it were, all the virtues important to the Emperor.

It seems that in the Tarragona gem we have managed to identify a lost work of Skylax, in which the master reassessed his treatment of an earlier subject, Hercules the citharode. He turned the picture around: where his Hercules faced right, the satyr faces left. (Here it must be remarked that on p. 29 of Gibert's book the gem's photograph was accidentally printed in reverse, and so the figure faces right, as on the Paris cameo.) But the satyr-intaglio was clearly made as a seal: it is much smaller, at 17x14,6 mm, than the Paris Hercules cameo (34x23 mm), and its inscription was naturally carved in mirror-writing, so as to be clearly legible on the sealing.

Before turning to questions of interpretation, we must examine the problem of authenticity. The Tarragona gem could quite easily be a forgery. From Ricoma's book<sup>18</sup> we know that the museum acquired the gem as a gift on November 20, 1915. A well-prepared forger could have made use of the publications of F. Stosch in 1724, S. Reinach in 1895, and of Furtwängler's book, published in 1900. Only the provenance of the Tarragona gem, which was displayed at the Barcelona World's Fair in 1893, is known exactly (the "gravel mine" near the town's harbour), as is the name of its first owner, a veterinarian from Reus, D. Joseph Dols y Bardina (Pedra grabada conejudíssima [Cose] que'ns llegà'l veterinari de Reus D. Joseph Dols y Bardina).<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately the book of Gibert y Olivé does not specify clearly who inherited the gem from the popular veterinary doctor, Joseph Dols y Bardina, but it seems clear that Dr. Dols was no longer alive in 1900, when Gibert's book was published. If we suspect that Dr. Dols was deceived by a forger who sold him the gem in Reus or Tarragona, it will not hurt if we remind ourselves that the gem engraved with the image of Hercules as citharode, recognized as original but later lost, was published in 1888 by Furtwängler for the first time since 1724, in a volume of the *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* that to this day is not available for study in Catalonia. We can quite confidently dismiss the suggestion that a forger well-versed in the contem-

<sup>17</sup> KLEINER 135. BERGMANN, M.: *Die Strahlen der Herrscher. Theomorphe Herrscherbild und politische Symbolik im Hellenismus und in der römischen Kaiserzeit*. Mainz 1998. 185–189.

<sup>18</sup> RICOMÀ 39. FURTWÄNGLER, A.: *Die antiken Gemmen. I–II*. Berlin–Leipzig, 1900., REINACH, S.: *Pierres gravées des Collections Marlborough et d'Orléans, des recueils d'Eckhel, Gori, Gravelle, Mariette, Millin, Stosch, réunies et rééditées*. Paris, 1895.

<sup>19</sup> GIBERT Y OLIVÉ 29.

porary German scholarly literature sold the gem, found supposedly at Tarragona, to a veterinarian from Reus in the five years between 1888 and 1893. If such a forger had existed, he certainly would have tried to increase the prestige value of his work by calling Dr. Dols' attention to Scylax's name. But in fact neither the doctor nor Gibert y Olivé, who first published the stone, nor Rosa Ricomà were able to read the inscription; which is to say that they were not aware that the intaglio was the work of Skylax.

The gem could also be an antique copy, a reformulation or perhaps a misunderstanding of the original. Against this possibility the objection might be raised that gems were not widely known in Antiquity, like public sculpture: hence it is unlikely that an ancient forger would have wished to produce a reformulation of Scylax's Hercules-gem, keeping the master's original signature.

Finally, it might be objected that, while the signature is original, the Tarragona gem is in fact the work of another master named Scylax. Apart from the fact that the existence of a second master of this name has never been suspected, it is singularly unlikely that a second Scylax would produce a work so similar to that of the first.

On the basis of the above considerations it seems likely, even if it cannot be proved beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the Tarragona intaglio is the work of the same man who engraved the Hercules. A comparison of the three signed works by Scylax shows that the letter-forms are indeed similar (e.g., use of lunar sigma); this does not, however, mean very much in itself. The objection might be raised that the Tarragona gem is an intaglio, whereas the Hercules gem is a cameo. It should be mentioned, first of all, in response that cameos were more expensive and thus were more likely to be made by order of the court than the cheaper intaglios; second, that the masters we know by name frequently worked in both genres, and that the cheaper intaglios in fact make up the larger part of the oeuvre of each.<sup>20</sup>

Engraver	Intaglio	Cameo
Aulos	6	1
Dioskourides	8	2
Sostratos	3	2
Hyllos	10	1
Skylax	3	1

As well, it must be remarked that cases do occur where the same engraver gives his name once in the nominative, once in the genitive.

Engraver	Nominativus	Genitivus
Solon	Richter 696; 697	694; 696; 698

<sup>20</sup> RICHTER 131–135.

Taken together, these considerations seem to justify our assumption that the gem is the work of the same artist who made the Hercules citharode for Nero. The question remains, that if both are the works of Scylax, why did he decide to reformulate his old subject? Diana E. E. Kleiner has written that Nero-portraits – of which, thanks to the *damnatio memoriae*, very few remain – can be divided into five groups.<sup>21</sup> The first type shows the princeps while still a child (AD 51), the second immediately follows his accession to the throne (AD 54), the third, so called Cagliari type shows the ruler after his break with his mother (AD 55). Types 4–5 show the features of the tyrant, surprisingly already in Nero's lifetime. If we see in the lost Paris gem a product of Seneca's positive Nero-propaganda, in which Nero is portrayed as the perfect embodiment at once of Apollonian and Herculean qualities, then the cameo ought to be dated to about AD 54/55. The Tarragona gem is, however, the product of Scylax's dissatisfaction: he no longer sees Hercules in the figure of the princeps, but only a satyr dressed as Hercules, a confidence-man figure dressed in the clothes of a hero, demanding recognition for feats he is not able to perform. This gem can thus be dated between 59 and 68.

Against this interpretation it might be mentioned that Scylax had already carved a satyr, and that there the satyr does not have the feet of a goat, but rather a human being (Richter No. 693). If, however, Scylax had really wished to emphasize that the Tarragona intaglio does not show the real Hercules, but only a satyr dressed as Hercules, he would of necessity have made use of this unmistakable mark of difference. The goat's feet betray the real meaning of the picture.

The final question which must be answered is how the gem came to Tarragona. Naturally it could have made the trip from Rome to Tarraco at any time after its making (if Scylax was at Nero's court at all at this time), since the Claudius intaglio was discovered in Kertch, in the Ukraine, which was even farther from Rome than Tarraco. A more probable solution can, however, be imagined. As is well known, the centre of resistance to Nero which grew up around Galba was located at Tarraco. If Scylax made the gem at his own initiative and wished to sell his gem with a satyr dressed as Heracles anywhere at all between 59 and 68, Tarraco was certainly the place. The emperor had turned out to be phony artist, a false Apollo and false Heracles: an impostor in the costume of a god. The disillusioned court engraver expressed his disillusionment in this way. If, however, he wished to make a living by his craft, he had to sell his gem, a dangerous act in Rome. But in Tarraco he would have found a buyer who, by purchasing such a seal and setting it in a ring, could express his loyalty to the rising Imperial star, Galba.

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<sup>21</sup> KLEINER 136: "The willful destruction of Nero's portraits after his death means that there are few surviving images from which to construct a chronological and typological sequence ... The portraits of Nero have been divided into five portrait types, their creation corresponding to the years 51, 54, 55, 59 and 64."