**Image and portraiture of Augustus, the Meroë Head**

**Introduction**

The Meroë head of Augustus is one of the best known of his portraits and one of the great treasures of the British Museum. It was used for the cover of the booklet produced for “The Image of Augustus” Exhibition in 1981. It was this exhibition where I first became intrigued by the idea that a portrait of a ruler was not just a likeness but had other purposes.

It has been used many times since such as for the cover of the book produced for the BBC series “I, Caesar” in 1997 about 6 of the most important rulers of Rome from Julius Caesar to Justinian. The Director of the British Museum, Neil Macgregor, included it as Number 35 in his History of the World in 100 objects in 2010. I wonder what it was about the carefully tousled looking Augustus that inspired him to ask Boris Johnson for his comments? It was used by the British Museum to publicise this Classics Day. In September 2014 a new British Museum publication about the head by Thorsten Opper in their excellent series *Objects In Focus* will be coming out.

**Bronze busts**

What is it about bronze that makes it so special? Bronze has been around since the Bronze Age, literally, and continues to be used for sculpture. It allows for great detail and durability and when it is polished it can shine like gold. Sometimes it is overlain with other materials and can even been covered in gold leaf. The problem with bronze is that it is very recyclable. All you need to do is break it up and melt it to reuse. It is also ripe for decapitation by an enemy if they wish to preserve the head for some reason as marble has a tendency to shatter if you start hacking at it. However, most of the bronzes from the Ancient World have been lost. The British Museum is particularly well off when it comes to surviving bronze heads.

**Sophocles C2nd BC** - This Hellenistic representation of the Greek playwright Sophocles in Room 22 is from a full length statue that once adorned a library in Smyrna in Asia Minor (Izmir in modern Turkey). It was donated by the Earl of Exeter in 1760 a year after the museum opened its doors to the public for the first time and was called the Arundel Homer having previously been identified as a Macedonian king. As we do not know what Homer or Sophocles looked like the identification is somewhat irrelevant but the young Octavian visiting one of the great libraries of the Roman World would probably have seen statues like this, perhaps during his education at Apollonia in Epirus (in modern Albania) where he heard of his great uncle’s assassination.

**Claudius found in River Alde at Rendham Suffolk** - This head in the Roman Britain gallery (49) is of Augustus’s great nephew the Emperor Claudius and probably came from the statue of him in Colchester ransacked by Boudicca and her Iceni warriors in 61 and taken back as an offering to their gods. Throwing your enemies’ heads into sacred rivers or lakes was a common practice in the Celtic world. It is directly analogous to the Meroë head even down to being decapitated by a war party led by a woman.

**Ife and Benin Heads C16th** - These heads in the Africa Gallery (25) come from the other side of the Sahara from Egypt and date from many centuries later but it is thought that the culture that produced them had discovered bronze working at a very early date and also used
it to make images of important members of the ruling family. On the right is Queen Tidia, a sort of African Catherine de Medici.

**Portrait Traditions**

Augustus had a particular problem when it came to portraiture. He wanted his image to be known throughout the Roman world but was conscious that his position, at least in the early years, depended on his being the man who rescued the Republic and not the man who restored the monarchy. His great uncle, Julius Caesar, had been assassinated because it was thought he was trying to restore the monarchy. To most Romans, portraits were only of living people if that person was a monarch and were particularly associated with Hellenistic rulers. However, such traditions went back much further.

**Statue of Senwoseret III 12th Dynasty c. 1850 BC Egypt Deir-el-Bahri black granite (Room 4)** - Although Egyptian statues were generally very stylised the statues of Senwoseret III are some of the earliest that appear to show genuine characteristics of the pharaoh. The large ears were a stylised feature but the grim look on his face makes his one of the easiest of early pharaohs to identify.

**Alexander the Great Alexandria C2nd-1st BC (Room 22)** - Many portrait busts were made of Alexander but none of those by his famous contemporaries have survived. This one was made centuries after his death in Egypt where a large number of the surviving ones were found. This one turned up in 1872. His successors often portrayed themselves in his image with various attributes tying them into his deification. Some Romans such as Pompey modelled their portraits on Alexander. Caesar’s were often more in the Roman Republican tradition.

**Seianti Hanunia Tlesnasa Etruscan c 150-140 BC found near Chiusi Tuscany (Room 71)** - Wealthy Etruscans were sometimes buried in elaborate ceramic sarcophagi such as this one with a reclining figure on the top. Experts speculated on whether these were meant to be portraits until 1997 when forensic scientists at the Unit of Art in Medicine at Manchester University reconstructed her face. Allowing for some artistic licence and the fact that Seianti would have wanted to look her best in the afterlife, it has been generally concluded that this was a portrait.

**Ancestor portraits from Republican Rome** - In Rome the revered members (such as ex-Consuls and other magistrates) of the ruling elite were honoured with death masks which would be preserved lovingly by their proud descendants and brought out on special occasions to be worn by family members or actors to allow ancestors to join in. These portraits were sometimes replaced by stone versions which were more durable such as these from late C1st BC Rome (70). Based on death masks these were faithful likenesses but always showed the person after death. Portraits of living Romans were not as easily accepted.

**Freedmen Portraits – Licinius father and son, Antistius Sarculo and wife** - These two pairs of funerary portraits (in 70) show how proud ex-slaves were in Augustan Rome to be able to proclaim their freedom and newly acquired rights. The two Liciniuses were craftsmen, carpenter and blacksmith and show the tools of their trade on their tombstone as well as the fasces carried by the lictors who symbolised the authority of their magistrates and were used in the ceremony conferring their freedom. The priest Sarculo has freed his slave in order to marry her allowing their children under a new law of Augustus’s to be citizens.
As the Republic started to veer towards a new type of government with one man in overall control from Marius and Sulla through Pompey and Julius Caesar, the personal image of these men became more and more common until it reached a climax with Caesar having statues put up in eastern cities honouring him as a god and in 45 BC an ivory portrait of him was carried in a litter in Rome and set on a platform in a ceremony normally reserved for the gods.

**Private versus Public Image**

Augustus did not want the ordinary people to think he was setting himself up as a god as some of them had thought about his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, but as Caesar had been declared divine after his death and had adopted Octavian in his will, he at least became the son of a god and thus he could be seen as such. In private this image could go one step further and actually portray him as a god.

**Private**

**Blacas cameo (Room 70)** - Augustus is depicted wearing the *aegis* of Minerva. It is made of Sardonyx 5” (12.8 cm) high with four layers and was acquired in 1867 from Duke of Blacas. This may have been commissioned after Augustus’s death when he had been declared a god so would not be so unusual but it is also possible it had been commissioned in his lifetime as a personal gift after his death or adopted member of the family. This with other similar cameos are sometimes called the *State Cameos*. Augustus is shown as young even when he was an old man. The *aegis* is a goat skin thrown over his shoulder shaped to fit the coloured part of the stone. It shows the head of the gorgon Medusa slain by Perseus with the help of Athena and was sometimes worn by Jupiter, thus identifying Augustus as Jupiter. Augustus’s diadem is a later addition and he probably originally had just a band tied round his head in the manner of the Hellenistic kings.

**Portland Vase (Room 70)** – This is a rare superb quality cameo blue and white glass acquired in 1945 but on loan from Dukes of Portland from 1810. The seven figures on the vase are something of a mystery, perhaps deliberately ambiguous to allow for multiple interpretations. The one certain figure is Cupid showing there is a love match on one side. Near him is a reclining female figure with a serpent. No other figures have positively recognisable attributes. The traditional interpretation is the courting of Thetis by Peleus with the hero being encouraged by Doris, Thetis’s mother. Susan Walker has another interpretation with the Peleus figure identified as Anthony being lured to Egypt by Cleopatra. If this is the case then the figures on the other side could be Octavia in the centre having been abandoned by Anthony with her brother, Octavian, next to her. He is shown nude as he would be after his deification after his death but the vase may well date from his lifetime. The other figure on their side is usually seen as Venus who was a direct ancestress of the Julians. Even if it is Peleus and Thetis, the Trojan War was still popular in Rome, especially the aftermath with Aeneas founding a colony in Italy that eventually led to the founding of Rome by Romulus in 753. Augustus liked to see himself as the third founder of Rome and associated himself with Aeneas and Romulus.

**Sword of Tiberius (Room 70)** – an iron sword in a bronze scabbard tinned and gilded dating to 15 BC found in Mainz when excavating for a railway bridge in 1848 and acquired by British Museum in 1866 donated by Felix Slade. The top of the scabbard shows Augustus’s
stepson Tiberius in military dress after his victory in Germany presenting a statue of Victory to a seated Augustus with Mars Ultor (the Avenger) and Victory behind him. Augustus appears semi-nude as Jupiter. By claiming all victories in his name he effectively prevented successful generals from acquiring a following that might have made them rivals. Inscriptions identify the figures as Augustus and Tiberius. Augustus also appears in the medallion in the centre.

Ionides Octavian (Room 70) – intaglio brown agate plaque 2” (4.2 cm) wide dating to 35-25 BC by Solon, acquired in 2001 for £240,914.09 with help from the National Art Collection Fund to match the Octavia/Livia companion known as the Arundel Diana (as it had been owned by the 2nd Earl of Arundel) bought in 1954. It had previously been owned (1781) by the 4th Duke of Marlborough, Johann Joachim Winkelmann and later Alexander Ionides. Octavian is shown with the caduceus of Mercury depicted very much like a large marble head in Alexandria. Livia/Octavia has a spear identifying her with Diana.

Small Chalcedony cameo of Augustus (Room 70) - acquired in 1996 for £20,000 with £10,000 from the National Art Collection Fund, 1.4” (3.4 cm) high. First recorded in 1761 and probably found in Rome, previously owned by the 2nd Earl of Bessborough and the 4th Duke of Marlborough. This tiny cameo was probably made around the time of the battle of Actium (31 BC) or shortly after when Octavian was still portraying himself with the intense gaze of a Hellenistic ruler. He has both the veil over his head of a priest and the laurel wreath of a victorious general. The twist of the head is not unlike the Meroë head but in the other direction.

Public Coins

Coins (not all on show but some in 70, others in 68)

The widest spread image of Augustus would have been his coins. Julius Caesar had appeared on some coins in the East during his lifetime but otherwise this was unheard of in the old Republic. It was something that Hellenistic rulers did. Thus when Anthony allied himself with Cleopatra he also appeared on her coins. Augustus is often shown with a god or goddess on the other side such as Jupiter in the pose seen on the Tiberius sword. Other coins show him receiving victory palms from generals but dressed more modestly in a toga. On one coin the inscription reads 'He has restored to the People of Rome their laws and their rights'. Other gods that he appears with include Pax on obverse and reverse, Apollo with a cithara or lyre, Mars with the standards lost to the Parthians by Crassus in 53 BC and which Augustus was so proud to have regained in 20 BC through diplomacy without bloodshed, and Venus his ancestress with Augustus in military dress as on statues such as the Prima Porta.

Statues

Statues were of three types as military hero such as the Porta Prima with the breast plate showing the return of the standards from Parthia in 20 BC, as a priest with veil over his head or as the First Citizen in a toga, a fashion he was trying to reintroduce. The pose is often the same and derives from Greek originals of gods, athletes, heroes or statesmen. Here the Farnese Hermes is a Roman copy of an original by Praxiteles (Room 1).
**The marble head of Augustus (Room 70)** is thought to be posthumous from when he had been deified but still shows him as a youth not aged 76. Acquired in 1879 bought from Alessandro Castellani.

Suetonius described Augustus thus (trans J C Rolfe):

> He was unusually handsome and exceedingly graceful at all periods of his life, though he cared nothing for personal adornment. He was so far from being particular about the dressing of his hair, that he would have several barbers working in a hurry at the same time, and as for his beard he now had it clipped and now shaved, while at the very same time he would either be reading or writing something. His expression, whether in conversation or when he was silent, was calm and mild…

> He had clear, bright eyes, in which he liked to have it thought that there was a kind of divine power, and it greatly pleased him, whenever he looked keenly at anyone, if he let his face fall as if before the radiance of the sun; but in his old age he could not see very well with his left eye. His teeth were wide apart, small, and ill-kept; his hair was slightly curly and inclining to golden; his eyebrows met. His ears were of moderate size, and his nose projected a little at the top and then bent slightly inward. His complexion was between dark and fair. He was short of stature … but this was concealed by the fine proportion and symmetry of his figure, and was noticeable only by comparison with some taller person standing beside him.

> It is said that his body was covered with spots and that he had birthmarks scattered over his breast and belly, corresponding in form, order and number with the stars of the Bear in the heavens; also numerous callous places resembling ringworm, caused by a constant itching of his body and a vigorous use of the strigil. He was not very strong in his left hip, thigh, and leg, and even limped slightly at times; but he strengthened them by treatment with sand and reeds.

**The Meroë head (Room 70)** - bronze with inlaid eyes of glass, metal and calcite irises, at 18” (46 cm) high, larger than life from a statue probably just under 8’ tall. You normally look at the face directly in the eyes although they do not look at you but straight past you, in fact, the statue would have been on a plinth and looking way above you. Rare for the eyes to survive. The proportions are based upon Classical Greek ideals with a calm distant gaze, emphasised by the eyes, giving him an air of quiet, assured strength. His hair falls onto his brow in waves that are typical of Augustus’s portraits. Probably made in Egypt but from casts sent from Rome. Found in December 1910 (1933 years after its loss) and acquired in 1911 when the National Art Collection Fund donated 1,000 guineas to the Sudan Excavation Committee for further work.

**The Kingdom of Kush**

Pharaoh Mentuhotep II of the 11th Dynasty who reunited Egypt in C21st BC undertook campaigns against Kush in the 29th and 31st years of his 51 year reign, the first reference to the name. By the C16th BC Kush was an Egyptian colony but when the New Kingdom disintegrated an independent kingdom was established around 1070 BC. Their kings built temples and pyramids and worshipped some Egyptian gods especially Ammon and Isis sometimes taking these names into their royal names. The capital moved to Napata in about 780 BC and around 727 BC King Piye invaded Egypt founding the 25th Dynasty which
continued until about 653 BC. One of the most powerful of these kings was Piye’s son Taharqo whose empire was vast. He also ushered in a renaissance in art and architecture. Taharqo’s sphinx from a rebuilt temple at Kawa (one of many) celebrates his Egyptian and Kushite credentials – an Egyptian body with an African face. He used Egyptian influenced hieroglyphs on his inscriptions although the Kushites had their own language which was not written down at that stage. This was number 22 in Neil Macgregor’s History of the World and can be seen in gallery 65. Taharqo and his successor Tanatamun fought a long campaign against the Assyrians but were ultimately expelled from Egypt. The capital moved to Meroë in 591 BC because, unlike Napata, the region around Meroë had enough woodland to provide fuel for iron works and Kush was no longer dependent on the Nile to trade with the outside world; instead they transported goods to the Red Sea and Greek merchants. In about 300 BC the kings started to be buried there instead of at Napata possibly to break away from the power of the priests at Napata. In C2nd BC a new Meroitic writing system was developed with an alphabet of 23 signs used in a hieroglyphic and cursive form (15 consonants, 4 vowels and 4 syllabic characters). Nearly 1300 cursive texts have been found and although the script has been deciphered the language behind has not with only a few words understood. The kingdom lasted till about AD 350.

In 31 BC Augustus defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium and took possession of Egypt, which became his personal province with officials appointed directly by Augustus. The head must date from after the battle of Actium in 31 BC and probably after 27 BC but before the raid in 24 BC described by Strabo, an exact contemporary of Augustus, from Smyrna (Izmir in modern Turkey) who wrote a History and Geography based on his travels and personal experiences towards the end of his life 17-24 AD. These included Egypt and Nubia although he referred to the Kushites as Ethiopians. In book 7 of his Geography, paragraphs 53 and 54 he describes the Kushites and the struggle with Rome:

53 Now Egypt was generally inclined to peace from the outset, because of the self-sufficiency of the country and of the difficulty of invasion by outsiders…, those towards the south, are inhabited by Troglyodes, Blemmyes, Nubae, and Megabari, those Ethiopians who live about Syenê. These are nomads, and not numerous, or warlike either, though they were thought to be so by the ancients, because often, like brigands, they would attack defenceless persons. As for those Ethiopians who extend towards the south and Meroë, they are not numerous either, nor do they collect in one mass, inasmuch as they inhabit a long, narrow, and winding stretch of river-land…; neither are they well equipped either for warfare or for any other kind of life. And now, too, the whole of the country is similarly disposed to peace. And the following is a sign of the fact: the country is sufficiently guarded by the Romans with only three cohorts, and even these are not complete; and when the Ethiopians dared to make an attack upon them, they imperilled their own country. The remaining Roman forces in Egypt are hardly as large as these, nor have the Romans used them collectively even once; for neither are the Egyptians themselves warriors, although they are very numerous, nor are the surrounding tribes…

54 But the Ethiopians, emboldened by the fact that a part of the Roman force in Egypt had been drawn away with Aelius Gallus when he was carrying on war against the Arabians, attacked the Thebaïs and the garrison of the three cohorts at Syenê, and by an unexpected onset took Syenê and Elephantinê and Philae, and enslaved the inhabitants, and also pulled down the statues of Caesar. But (Publius) Petronius, setting out with less than ten thousand infantry and eight hundred cavalry against
thirty thousand men, first forced them to flee back to Pselchis, an Ethiopian city, and
sent ambassadors to demand what they had taken, as also to ask the reasons why they
had begun war; and when they said that they had been wronged by the Nomarchs, he
replied that these were not rulers of the country, but Caesar; and when they had
requested three days for deliberation, but did nothing they should have done, he made
an attack and forced them to come forth to battle; and he quickly turned them to
flight, since they were badly marshalled and badly armed; for they had large oblong
shields, and those too made of raw ox-hide, and as weapons some had only axes,
others pikes, and others swords. Now some were driven together into the city, others
fled into the desert, and others found refuge on a neighbouring island, having waded
into the channel, for on account of the current the crocodiles were not numerous there.
Among these fugitive were the generals of Queen Candacê, who was ruler of the
Ethiopians in my time — a masculine sort of woman, and blind in one eye. These, one
and all, he captured alive, having sailed after them in both rafts and ships, and he sent
them forthwith down to Alexandria; and he also attacked Pselchis and captured it; and
if the multitude of those who fell in the battle be added to the number of the captives,
those who escaped must have been altogether few in number… After this he set out
for Napata. This was the royal residence of Candacê; and her son was there, and she
herself was residing at a place near by. But though she sent ambassadors to treat for
friendship and offered to give back the captives and the statues brought from Syenê,
Petronius attacked and captured Napata too, from which her son had fled, and rased it
to the ground; and having enslaved its inhabitants, he turned back again with the
booty, having decided that the regions farther on would be hard to traverse. But he
fortified Premnis better, threw in a garrison and food for four hundred men for two
years, and set out for Alexandria. As for the captives, he sold some of them as booty,
and sent one thousand to Caesar, who had recently returned from Cantabria; and the
others died of diseases. Meantime Candacê marched against the garrison with many
thousands of men, but Petronius set out to its assistance and arrived at the fortress
first; and when he had made the place thoroughly secure by sundry devices,
ambassadors came, but he bade them go to Caesar; and when they asserted that they
did not know who Caesar was or where they should have to go to find him, he gave
them escorts; and they went to Samos, since Caesar was there and intended to proceed
to Syria from there, after despatching Tiberius to Armenia. And when the
ambassadors had obtained everything they pled for, he even remitted the tributes
which he had imposed.

The Meroë head was hacked off a statue of Augustus in Aswan or nearby and taken to Meroë
where it was buried under a monumental stairway of a temple leading to an altar of Victory
so that all entering or leaving walked on it in the ultimate gesture of humiliation. Remains of
frescoes in the temple appear to show Roman prisoners of war before a Meroitic ruler. The
Romans were unable to reach as far south as the Kushite capital itself.

The head was excavated by the John Garstang Professor of Archaeology at Liverpool
University (1907-1941) in December 1910 at Meroë. He excavated in the Sudan and Meroë
between 1909 and 1914.

Stela from Hamadab (Room 65) - one of the longest known monumental texts in Meroitic,
one of a pair found a few kilometres south of Meroë. Discovered by Professor Garstang in
1912. It is rare for one historical description of an event that produced an excavated object to
survive but we may have two descriptions, one from each side. The stelae stood either side
of the main doorway into a temple. At the top of the stela are the remains of a relief panel depicting the Kushite rulers Queen Amanirenas and Prince Akinidad. On the left they are shown facing a god, probably Ammon, whilst on the right they are facing a goddess, probably Mut. Below this is a frieze depicting bound prisoners. An inscription in Meroitic cursive script is carved on the lower part of the stela. In this inscription, the names of Amanirenas and Akinidad are recognisable. This inscription may commemorate the Kushite raid on Roman Egypt in 24 BC.

Amanirenas was a queen of the Kush from c. 40 BC to 10 BC. Her full name and title was Amnirense gore li kdwe li ("Ameniras, Qore and Kandake"). She was almost certainly the leader during the war against the Romans from 27 BC to 22 BC described by Strabo. The title of gore as well as kandake suggests that she was a ruling queen. Her name is associated with those of Teriteqas and Akinidad. The former was probably her husband, the latter her son but both probably died during the campaign. That Amanirenas extracted such favourable terms from Augustus demonstrates what an effective ruler she was as does the failure of Augustus to retrieve the Meroë head when other statues were returned.

**Temple Relief from Funerary Chapel of Queen Shanakdakhete (Room 65)** - from the south side of her pyramid, C2nd BC. The sandstone figures show the queen and her son protected by Isis. From Meroë donated in 1905 by the Sudan government. Queen Shanakdakhete was the first female ruler of Kush reigning from c. 170 to c. 150 BC. Although no portrait of Amanirenas survives this representation of her predecessor gives a good idea of the importance to women rulers of Kush.

Having got rid of one woman ruler, Cleopatra, it must have been doubly frustrating for Augustus to have to have dealt with another one so soon afterwards and ironic that Women rulers should have given him so much trouble considering in what low regard the Romans held women in power.