

Highlight

A Gem for a Birth

An Intaglio Portrait of the Roman Empress Faustina Minor

By Martin Flashar

Cut stones, intaglios and cameos can be exceptionally exquisite. Others, like those born of folk belief in a form resembling magic amulets, are quite plain. But if, as here, in a tiny format just two centimetres high, they show an exceptionally finely carved and beautifully detailed portrait bust of a woman, there can be no doubt that we are dealing with an imperial portrait. To cut to the chase, the subject in this case is Faustina the Younger.

Annia Galeria Faustina, born ca. 130 A.D., was the daughter of the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius (r. 138 to 161 A.D.) and his wife, the eponymous Faustina the Elder, which is why she was henceforth called Faustina Minor. The wife of Marcus Aurelius (r. 161 to 180 A.D.), she is often judged negatively in ancient sources, which is perhaps surprising given the high esteem in which her husband was held as the intellectual and “philosopher king” who with his *Meditations* bequeathed posterity a remarkable work in the tradition of Stoa. Faustina’s negative image is apparently attributable mainly to her son Commodus, Marcus Aurelius’ successor, whom ancient sources frowned on, not least on account of his gladiatorial antics in the amphitheatre.

The question of progeny loomed very large for the “adopted emperors,” whose adherence to the dynastic imperative verged on the obsessive. The problem had presented itself even for Emperor Hadrian (r. 117 to 138 A.D.), who having no biological offspring of his own, had hastily adopted Antoninus shortly before his death. This all changed with Antoninus’ daughter, Faustina Minor, who bore her husband thirteen children. Not all of them lived very long and some died shortly after birth. Her fecundity was nevertheless fêted as an accomplishment even then. It is the archaeologist Klaus Fittschen we have to thank for having undertaken a ground-breaking study of the coin portraits of Faustina Minor, in which he not only differentiates and catalogues the many different types of portrait, but also links the historical place and time of their minting to the empress’s many deliveries. For why else should a woman (even an empress) be accorded nine new portrait types?

The introduction of *Fecunditas* on the reverse of many of the coins bearing Faustina’s likeness seems to confirm this. Fertility is personified as a standing, fully-clad female figure holding a sceptre and an infant.

The analysis of this very fine carnelian reveals the following details of the profile head: hair swept out from the crown in parallel strands (no sign of the “melon coiffure” of the earlier Faustina portraits); a tripartite fillet, or at any rate no “crown-like” diadem; a low bun at the nape of the neck consisting of coiled braids, rather than loose strands of hair; a small, slightly coiled braid falling down onto the neck; a two-part styling of the hair from the forehead and temples to the back of the head with spiralling curls hanging down at the front and slightly kinked parallel strands towards the back.

The many different portraits of Faustina are not easily told apart, but after reviewing them it would seem that our intaglio comes closest to type no. 8, created in 162 A.D. on the occasion of the birth of Faustina’s son, Annius Verus. The empress herself died in 176 A.D.

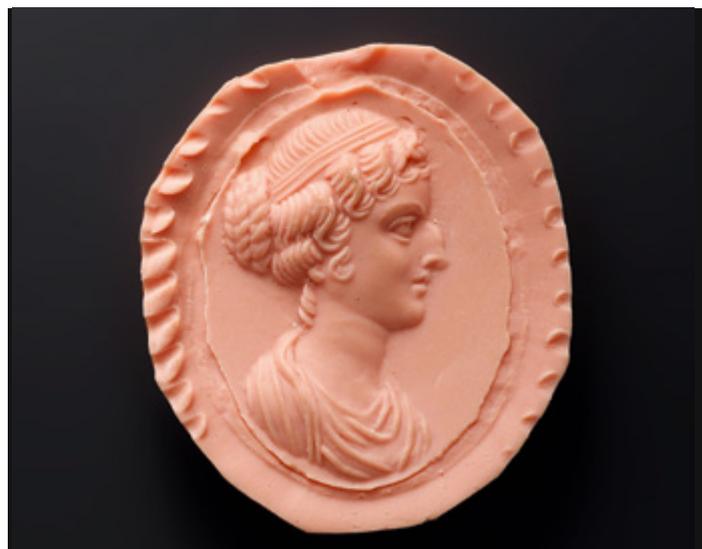
One indication of the value attached to Roman imperial intaglios, incidentally, is the fact that the Merovingian and Frankish kings were still sealing official documents with them as late as the 9th century, occasionally appending an explicit reference to the ancient ruler depicted. This custom remained exclusive, but is nevertheless valu-

able proof of an iconographic tradition that extended from Roman Antiquity until well into the Early Middle Ages.

Klaus Fittschen, *Die Bildnistypen der Faustina minor und die Fecunditas Augustae*, Abh. der Akad. der Wiss. Göttingen, Philolog.-Histor. Klasse, Dritte Folge no. 126 (Göttingen 1982); Stefan Priwitz, *Faustina Minor – Ehefrau eines Idealkaisers und Mutter eines Tyrannen* (Bonn 2009).



PENDANT WITH THE PORTRAIT OF EMPRESS FAUSTINA THE YOUNGER.
H. 2.6 cm. Gold, carnelian. Roman, ca. 162 B.C. CHF 40,000



The impression of the intaglio highlights the quality of its craftsmanship.