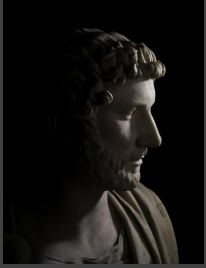


Faces of Rome

AN EXERCISE IN CONTEXT



The Importance of Context

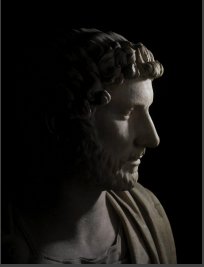
When starting out in the study of Ancient History, one of the first skills you need to develop is **awareness of context**. This isn't easy, because it can encompass a lot of things: physical context, historical context, social context, and so on. But at its most basic, it's a way of thinking about sources which **gives as much attention to the world around the source as it does to the source itself**.

Let's look at an example. First I'll invite you to look at a picture of a statue and to write down your response to it, without information about context. Then I'll take you through a few more pictures: these will give you some contextual knowledge. Finally we'll return to the original picture, and think about how context can improve our analysis of it.

What do you think of this statue?

This is a bust of the Emperor Hadrian, from around 125-130 AD: there were many like it around the empire. Take a few moments to write down your response to the statue. Start by describing what you see. Then write about how this presents Hadrian, and about what message it would send to Roman viewers about the sort of emperor Hadrian wanted to be.





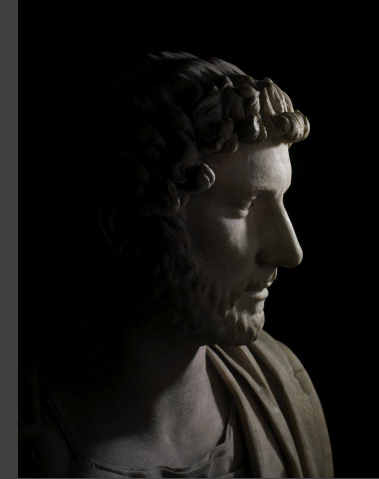
Your analysis

You've no doubt made some observations on the tight, stylised curls of his hair, and his beard – Hadrian was the first emperor to be portrayed with a beard. You may (if you were dedicating some time to this exercise) have looked up some of the articles written about Hadrian's beard, and what it says about his identification with Greek models.

You may have noticed the prominent and carefully-draped folds of his cloak, marking him as a military man rather than a statesman in a toga. You might (if you were doing research) link this to other statues of Hadrian in military dress, to show a consistent identification of Hadrian with the army, and with military success.

You may have written something about what his face suggests of his personality: you may think that he looks calm, serious but not forbidding, confident. You may also have mentioned his age: his face appears unlined, and his age is difficult to determine, making this statue-type difficult to date.

All of this is important, and all would have a place in an analysis of this source. But how would a Roman respond to this statue? What are you missing? The answer lies in the historical context of portrait busts.

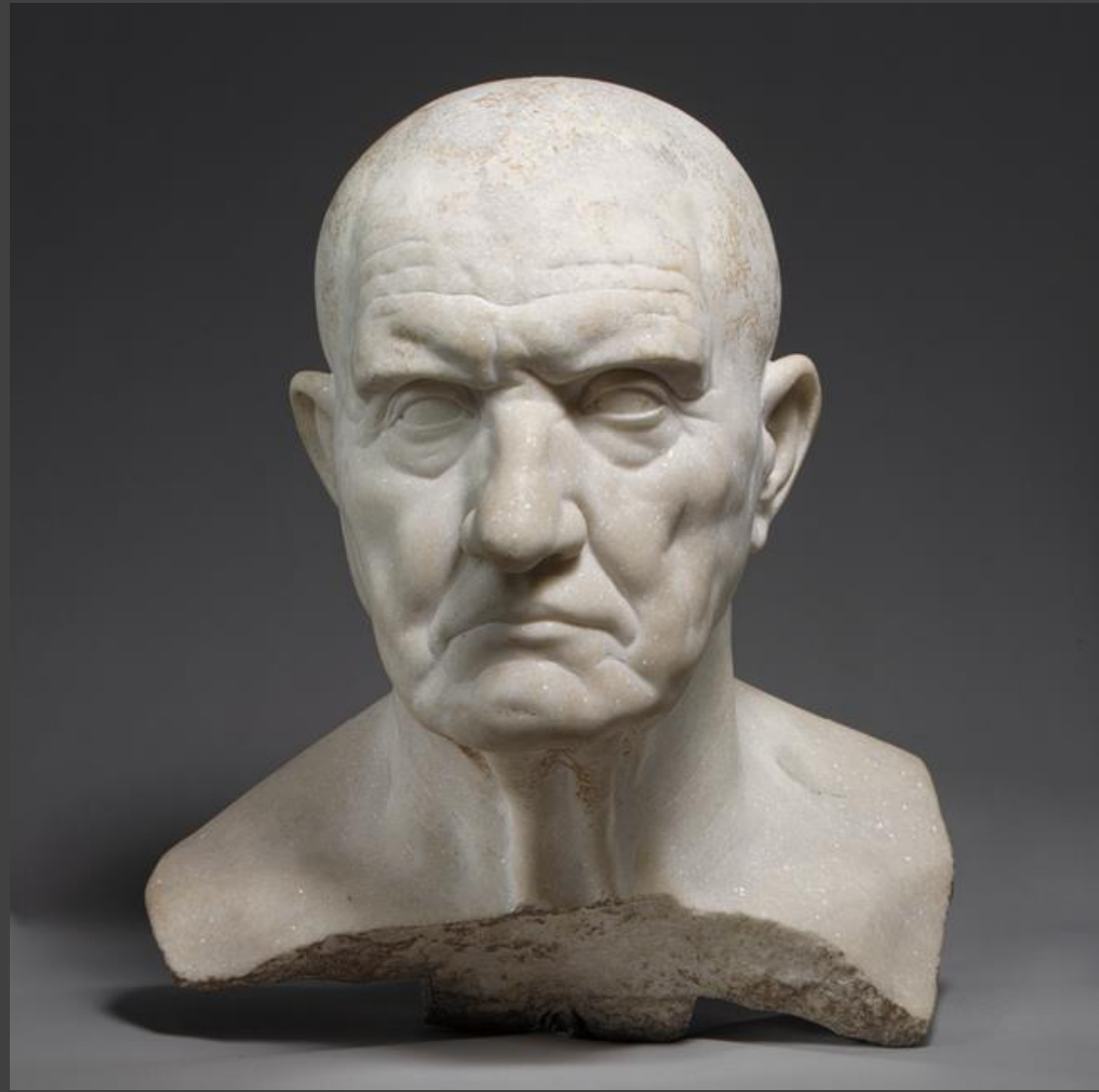


Let's go back in time...

...ABOUT 200 YEARS, BACK TO REPUBLICAN ROME.

A Republican Roman, 1st century BC.

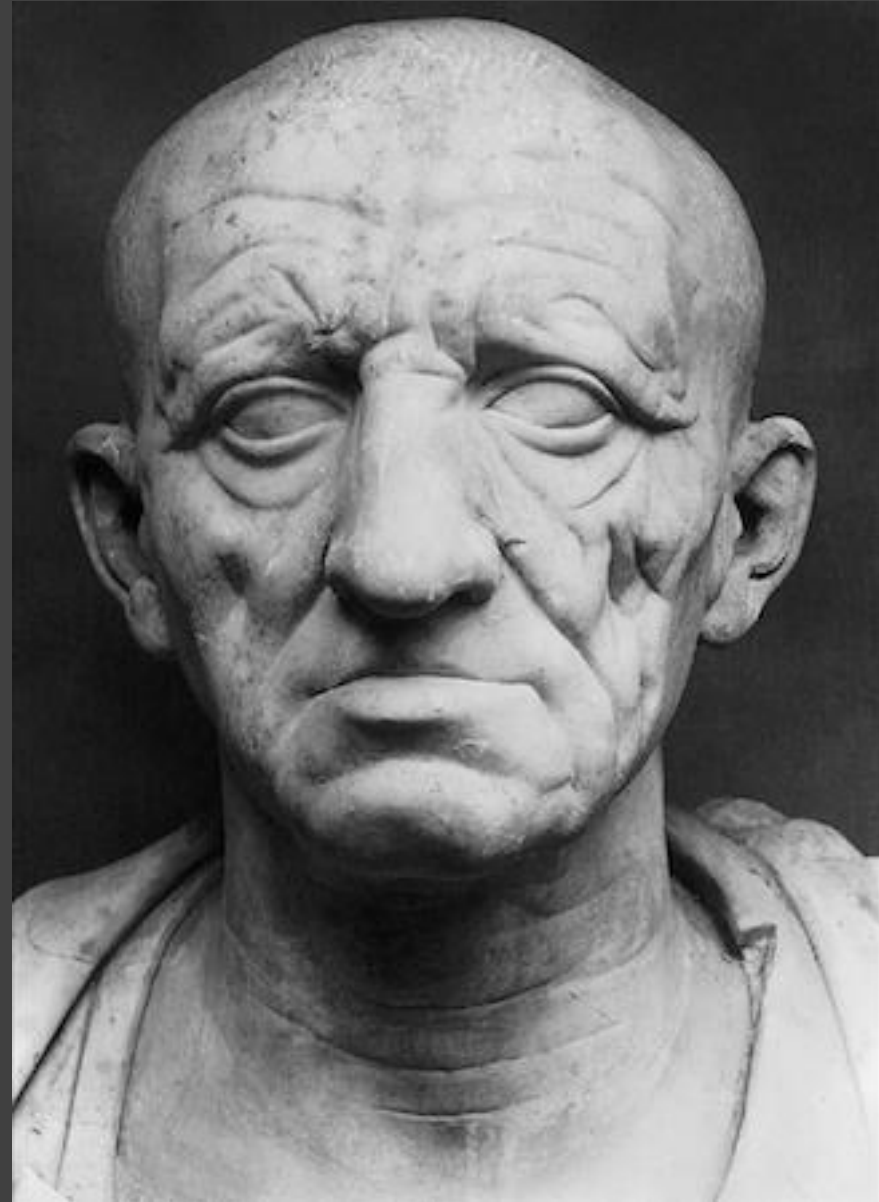
Write down your first impressions of this chap. How did he want to be remembered? What qualities do you think he valued?



A Republican Roman, 1st century BC.

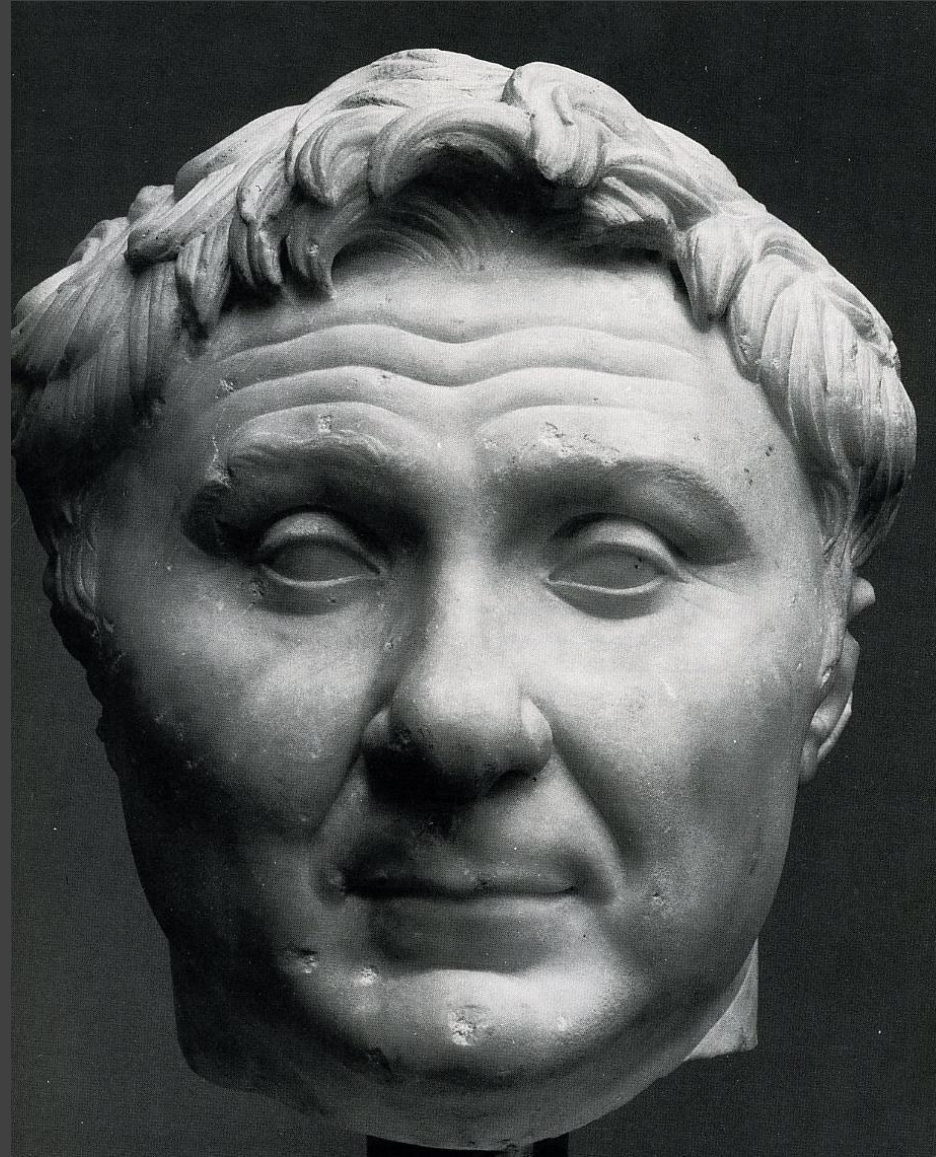
Here's another one: name unknown.
What do the two portraits have in
common?

This style is known as 'veristic', and it's
characteristic of late Republican
portraits.



Pompey the Great, circa 50 BC.

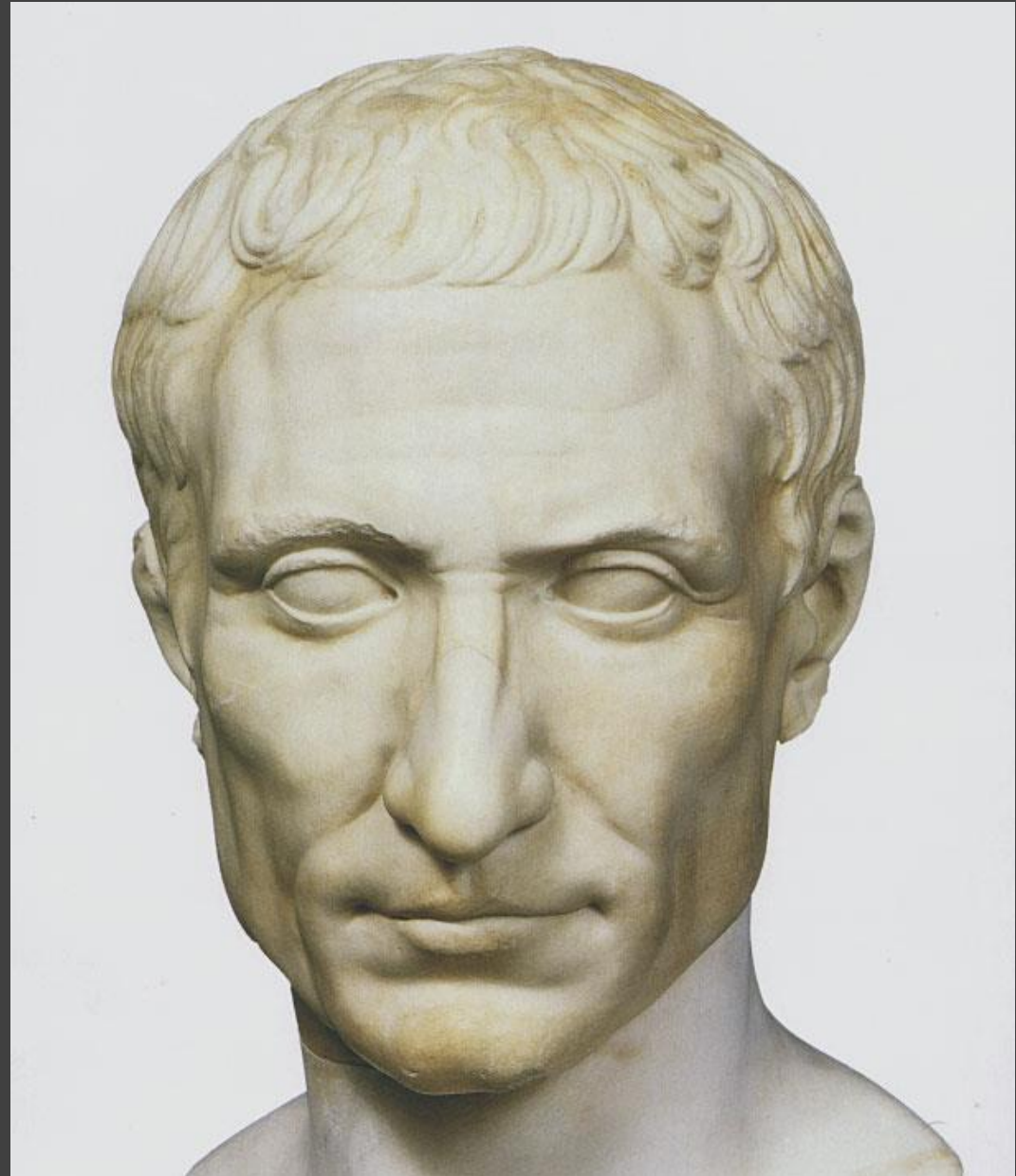
What are your impressions of Pompey here? Considering the fact that Pompey, self-titled 'The Great', spent his whole career trying to be seen as a suitable candidate for the highest offices of the Roman world, what does this portrait tell us about the qualities expected of a Roman leader?

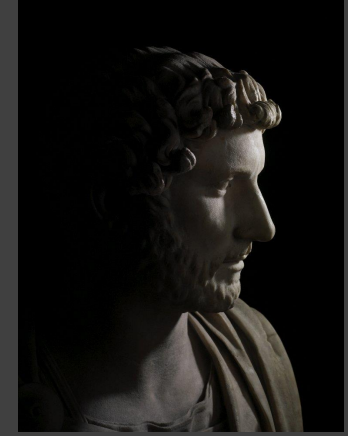


Julius Caesar,
probably dating
to between 30
and 20 BC.

What do you think of this portrait of
Julius Caesar, Pompey's aristocratic
nemesis?

Bearing in mind that Caesar was often
mocked for his hair loss, what do you
think of his hair in this portrait?





A change in style...

... WITH THE GREAT CHANGE FROM REPUBLIC TO EMPIRE.

Augustus: the Prima Porta statue.

Augustus became styled as a remote, ageless, god-like figure, with perfect hair (like Julius Caesar's, but a bit thicker!) and regular, unlined features. Throughout the four decades of his rule, his portrait was never updated.

What does this suggest about a change in values, or in the perception of leadership, as the Republic became an Empire?



Augustus as Pontifex Maximus.

Augustus was portrayed as a warrior with divine connections, in the Prima Porta statue, and as chief priest of the gods here, in the Via Labicana statue. His impassive, ageless face remains the same.



Tiberius, from Herculaneum dated around 37 AD.

The medium and the workmanship of this statue are different, but we can clearly see what this owes to the statue of Augustus as Pontifex Maximus.

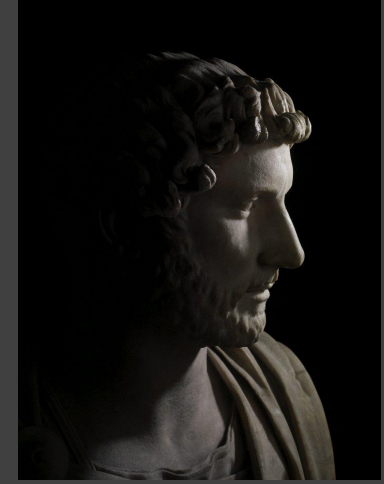
Written sources give us a rather different impression of Tiberius' appearance: Tacitus says that 'he possessed a tall, round-shouldered, and abnormally slender figure, a head without a trace of hair, and an ulcerous face generally variegated with plasters' (*Ann.* 4.57). While we don't know that this is true, it does suggest that a later generation of Romans were not convinced by the inhuman perfection of his portrait!



Caligula, between 37 and 41 AD.

There is a marked family resemblance to Tiberius and Augustus here: although Caligula's expression is perhaps subtly different.



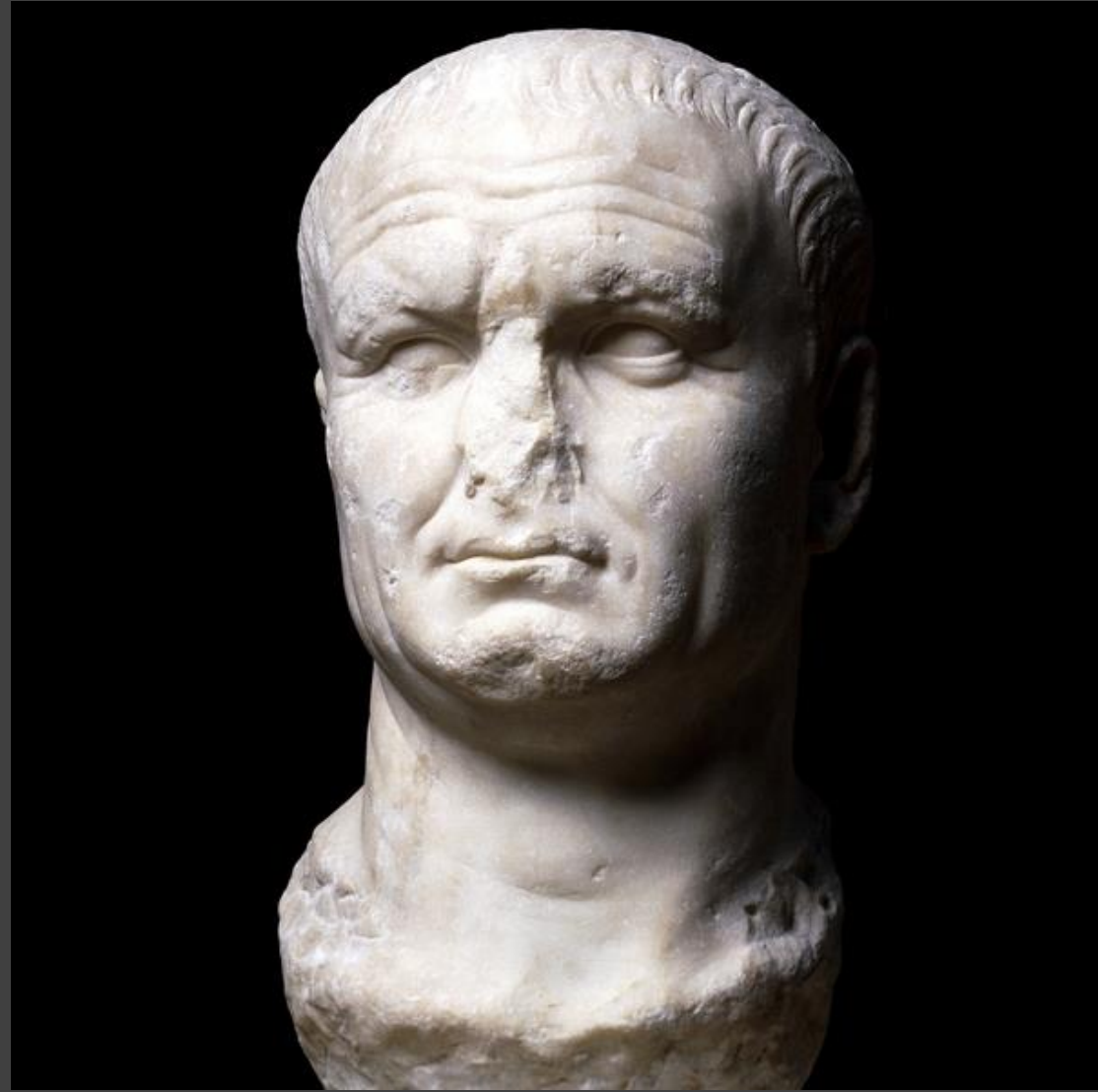


More changes...

...AS THE JULIO-CLAUDIAN LINE ENDS, AND THE FLAVIANS TAKE OVER.

Vespasian, from North Africa, 70- 80 AD.

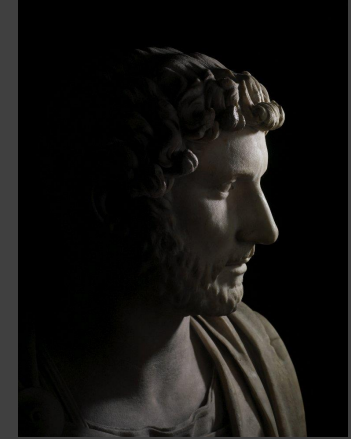
This is a rough and damaged statue, but there's clearly a shift from the idealised Julio-Claudian portraits here.



Domitian, around 90 AD.

This is not a particularly flattering portrait of Domitian – not least because it is very obvious here that he is wearing a wig to hide his baldness!





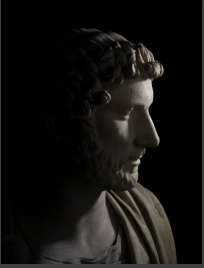
And back again to Hadrian...

And finally...

... back to our first statue (in the British Museum). Now, with your knowledge of context, you can see that Hadrian is not doing what Vespasian did, by presenting himself in the manner of Republican senators: instead he is appropriating some of Augustus' techniques of self-presentation for himself. His portrait is ageless, stylised and serene.

However, it is also recognisable: he looks like a man, not a god. Lessons have been learned from previous emperors' mistakes: too great a gulf between image and reality can become a source of embarrassment!





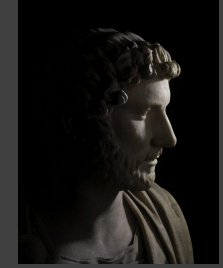
To return to our discussion of context...

Your initial response to the statue was valuable and important – particularly if you researched some of the features you noticed.

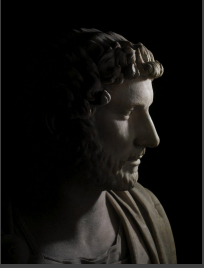
However, without a knowledge of context you're limited to what you see in front of you.

With an awareness of the changes in portrait styles which took place over 150 years or so, you can now see how Hadrian positions himself within a tradition of visual communication and self-identification through statues.

This might lead you to argue that Hadrian's military dress, ageless face and regular, smooth features hark back to the time of Augustus, now seen by many as a Golden Age of prosperity and success. Yet in the realism of the statue he gives himself a distinctive look which avoids the excesses of Republican veristic portraiture, while also setting him apart from the inhuman and implausible perfection of the later Julio-Claudian portraits.



Knowledge of context doesn't necessarily change what you want to say: but it allows you to take your points further and deeper, and to write with more authority about what a source might mean to its intended audience.



Further reading

K. Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 2003).

H. I. Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in the Roman Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

E. Gruen, *Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

D. Jackson, "Verism and the Ancestral Portrait," *Greece & Rome* 34.1 (1987):32-47.

D. E. E. Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

G. M. A. Richter, "The Origin of Verism in Roman Portraits," *Journal of Roman Studies* 45.1-2 (1955):39-46.

J. Tanner, "Portraits, Power, and Patronage in the Late Roman Republic," *Journal of Roman Studies* 90 (2000), pp. 18-50.

S. Walker, *Greek and Roman Portraits* (London 1995)