

## Messalina *Invicta*: Gender and Sexual Behavior as a Discourse of Power in Portable Objects in the Roman Empire

In well-known passages, Juvenal (*Sat.* 6.114-135) and Tacitus (11.26.1-6) frame the empress Messalina as an insatiable sexual aggressor, whose “monstrous infamy” (*magnitudinem infamiae*) proves her husband Claudius is unfit to rule the empire. Scholars have long drawn on these passages to analyze how highly gendered and sexualized political invective became a standard part of “bad emperor” critiques, and how the female body became a contested site of imperial discourse (e.g.: Joshel 1997; Sebesta 1998; Bowditch 2023). With this hyper-femininity also came critiques of deviant masculinities and the perceived decline in traditional Roman masculinity (e.g.: McDonnell 2006; Williams 2010). Yet, the written word rarely engaged with more than a minimal, elite audience. Imagery, however, had a significantly wider reach. This same period saw a significant boom in erotic imagery that drew on similar gendered stereotypes, and yet it is rarely drawn into studies of imperial imagery. This paper bridges that gap and reads erotic imagery as part of a broader shift in imperial discourse that centered gendered language in Roman self-perception and its visualization of conquered peoples. Erotic imagery was adapted to respond to, and reflect, the political and moral discourses on masculinity and power that were common motifs in Roman elegy and historical narratives. Such imagery was common not only in private, elite spaces but also in public baths, such as in the Suburban Baths in Pompeii, and on portable objects, such as lamps and intaglios. As such, erotic imagery could transmit visual statements about gender and power to a far wider audience, which then reshaped and reinterpreted them within their own cultural contexts. Consequently, objects with erotic or sexual themes stand at a historiographical crossroads: they are simultaneously reflections of imperial

notions of power and objects that can illustrate local conceptions of sexuality and sexual behavior outside the normative boundaries of imperial culture.

#### Selected Bibliography

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