

Nero-artist and the transformations in the Principate¹

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To study Nero's artistic activity is first of all to try to understand the nature of the relationship between imperial power and the public spectacles, both in the Julio-Claudian period itself and beyond, considering that it's necessary to notice in which way the relationship between power and spectacles was understood in the main available sources for the period - specifically Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio. We focus this paper on Nero's period itself to understand its particularities and therefore to discuss in what way we can explain him as the "emperor-artist", musician par excellence, and how that image was apprehended by his contemporaries and by the historiographical tradition that followed. Also, avoidance of an approach that tries to reveal the emperor's personal reasons is vital, although this is apparently an obvious methodological procedure. That is because some scholars still insist on formulating theories which are centered on his possible "real" intentions², so that they have been subtly influencing some recent views on Nero as an artist. Obviously, although they would have existed, it seems much more pertinent to consider the apprehension of the Roman society's different strata towards the emperor's *sui-generis* behavior.

Public spectacles allowed a space of very singular and efficient dialogue between the princeps and the several layers of the Roman society, particularly the populace of Rome. From the consolidation of the Principate with Augustus and Tiberius, legal measures started to restrict, or at least they sought to, the political activity of the masses - especially as in the case of the transferring of the magistrates' election from the popular assemblies to the Senate, in 14 A.D.³. Even then, the emperors could not totally put aside the support of the people, what Augustus tried to maintain through, among other measures, his cultural program. That support was revealed as so fundamental that we see Tiberius being portrayed as an extremely unpopular emperor, due to his aversion to the direct contact with

¹ I wish to express my immense gratitude to my tutor, Prof. Norberto Luiz Guarinello, who guided me since my naive beginning as an undergraduate.

² Like, for instance, Eugen Cizek's concept of "neronism", in: *Néron*. Paris: Fayard, 1982.

³ See Fergus Millar. *The Emperor in the Roman World*. London: Duckworth, 1992. P.302.

the masses. Avoiding public spectacles can even be seen as one of the main reasons for the construction of a negative image of him in relation to public opinion.

Places like the circus, the theater and the arena exposed the emperor to a direct contact with the audience: the princeps was one of the main objects of the general attention there (if not the most important one) and that turned him capable to notice as much the approval as the opposition of the masses to his government. One singular characteristic of those spaces was the people's relative freedom of expression when evaluating the emperors in such occasions⁴. The manifestations happening then served, therefore, as an important thermometer of the emperors' popularity and also as a form, indirect though, of the maintenance of the political activity of Rome's population.

Another singular aspect and of great importance to the characterization, this time, of the Roman aristocracy in the spectacles is the activity of certain of its own members on the stages and on the arena. The sources' accounts reveal the true fascination of the Roman elite for those amusements considered degrading, and no matter how much the texts show them in a critical way, condemning the involved, an attentive analysis makes evident that those participations were several times volunteered and not forced by imposition or emperors' whim, as in the case of Nero. Even some severe punishments and the attribution of *infamia* to any member of the elite that would dedicate him or herself to public presentations didn't seem to prevent on the whole some of whom inverting their social position, even if temporarily, to perform as actors, gladiators, charioteers, musicians or dancers⁵. Obviously even the artistic activities of several emperors (and not only Nero, see for example Gaius, Hadrian or Commodus) may have served as inspiration for anyone that wanted to perform publicly, what then justifies the precariousness of the punitive action against those senators and equestrians.

What is important to notice in those activities, though, is their amateur character, although in the case of the festivals organized by Nero they have been programmed and driven in a systematic way. Even so, only Nero intended to totally subvert the social order when presenting himself as a professional artist. The elites "played" with a social position which they could easily revert from, but Nero, at least from 64 A.D.⁶, didn't intend to

⁴ See an analysis on this matter in José R. Aja-Sanchez. "*Vox populi et princeps*: el impacto de la opinión pública sobre el comportamiento político de los emperadores romanos" in: *Latomus*. 55 2, apr/jun 1996. Pp. 295-328.

⁵ See Barbara Levick. "The *Senatus Consultum* from Larinum" in: *Journal of Roman Studies*. Vol.LXXIII, 1983. Pp.97-115.

⁶ At his artistic debut in Naples, mentioned in Tacitus. *Annales* 15.33-34 and Suetonius. *Nero* 20.2-3.

separate one thing from the other, although they are diametrically the opposite. That aspect is fundamental so that we can understand the process that followed. First comes the Roman elites' adhesion to his cultural policy, but then we see the fundamental changes after Nero's transformation from patron of this hellenizing policy to being the supposedly professional virtuoso. It seems then clear that these changes could have been one of the main factors for the loss of the political support of the senatorial aristocracy, which can be considered as having contributed strongly to his fall.

However, two different types of opposition seem to have been formed: one by the Roman senators of stoic influence, who planned the conspiracy of 65 A.D, and another, by the provincial elite led by Vindex. He particularly seemed to strongly disapprove the emperor's activities, which would be averse to the "Roman spirit", and whose nature basically coincides with the one of the opposition that we see in the posterior sources related to the period⁷. The stoic senators, a group which was in great part eliminated by Nero, formed a restricted "party" and, as so, didn't necessarily reflect the senatorial class as a whole in the dissatisfaction with the emperor. Therefore, although among their criticism on Nero there was also the condemnation of his attitude as an artist, we cannot say that that group has contributed to his fall or to the increase of his unpopularity in Rome. The artistic trip to Greece⁸ and the reception of Tiridates⁹ are examples of what the sources themselves reluctantly give us to show that Nero still had support, although eminently from the plebs, after the plotters' elimination.

Nero was always close to the populace of Rome, and he continued to be so until the end of his reign¹⁰. All that popularity was largely owing to the identification that the people had with an emperor dedicated to making himself present in the places where his visibility was more tangible, and in a such way that he assumed a role which was similar to the more possibly distant social position of the one attributed to the emperor. The inversion of such social roles, which are diametrically different, can be considered attractive to the eyes of the populace if we consider it as a challenge on the part of the emperor to the established order - what is nothing less than a singular manifestation of authority. To be degraded when he wanted to the artist's infamous condition, who sells his art and therefore corrupts himself, would be then a way for Nero to demonstrate and to impose his supreme power.

⁷ See specially Vindex's speech in Cassius Dio. *Roman History* 63.22.2-6.

⁸ Cf. Suetonius. *Nero* 22.3 ff. and Cassius Dio. *Roman History* 63.8 ff.

⁹ Suetonius. *Nero* 13 and Cassius Dio. *Roman History* esp. 63.3 and 6.

¹⁰ Suetonius. *Nero* 57 and Tacitus. *Histories* 1.4.

Of course not everything worked as intended, if we follow that reasoning. The support just of the populace was never enough to sustain an emperor in Rome (and when could it have been in any other time?) and we see in Nero a good example of that. When his attitude surpassed the elites' limit of tolerance (especially the provincial ones) with regards to the established order, the fragility of the political support that Nero tried to build became evident. The best example of that process would be, clearly, the apex of his artistic activities in Greece, since it occurred a little before the events that culminated in his fall.

If we can consider Mark Morford's approach¹¹, of the Neronian games as part of the cultural patronage in Augustus' molds, the reason of the elites' disenchantment, which would then generate the opposition to Nero's artistic activities, is now more evident. If Nero didn't participate actively, as a professional, in the Juvenalia¹² and in the first Neronia¹³, having just been patron of the elites' artistic activity, his performance as competitor in the second Neronia¹⁴ destroys the validity of that patronage. It is still interesting to observe that in this particular festival there is not any mention in the sources of the participation of anyone from the elites¹⁵, and Nero just competes with professional musicians. The support of the populace only would not be enough, and the opposition makes itself present with force, exasperated by the emperor's new attitude.

It is obvious that the condemnation of Nero as a professional musician is present both in the sources and in his contemporaries. Even so, it is interesting to notice a peculiarity on the later authors' criticism, in the case of the Roman elites' amateur artistic activity, Hellenistic style. Its presence reveals also how common and even frequent it was during the Principate of Nero, which proves once more one of our points here. Even among some of the stoic senators that were opposed to Nero we find two paradoxical examples of artistic activity: both Calpurnius Piso and Thrasea Paetus are mentioned by an embarrassed Tacitus as amateur artists¹⁶.

The sources end up by being unanimous when criticising the image of the professional musician associated to Nero. The reason of such a strong opposition comes really from the conception of professional musical activity during the Principate and its

¹¹ Mark Morford. "Nero's patronage and participation in literature and the arts" in: Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard Temporini (eds.). *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*. Vol.II - Principate 32.3, "Sprache und Literatur". Berlin: De Gruyter, 1985. Pp.2003-2031.

¹² Tacitus. *Annales* 14.15, Suetonius. *Nero*, 11.1 and Cassius Dio. *Roman History*, 61.19.1 ff.

¹³ Tacitus. *Annales* 14.20-21, Suetonius. *Nero*, 12.3 and Cassius Dio. *Roman History* 61.21.2.

¹⁴ Tacitus. *Annales* 16.4-5, Suetonius. *Nero* 21 and Cassius Dio. *Roman History* 62.29.1.

¹⁵ See reference on Tacitus, note above.

¹⁶ Tacitus. *Annales* 15.65 for Piso and 16.21 for Thrasea.

incompatibility with the emperor's position. For Nero to have competed seriously in musical tournaments, the possibility that the emperor could not be the winner seemed tangible for the audience, still more than it could have been for him. Nevertheless, it is by definition absurd that the princeps would not be not supreme in every sense - the concept of the contrary justifies, as we see, the spectators' perplexity, as of the sources themselves, with Nero's attitude on stage.

A considerable part of the bibliography regarding Nero as an artist has studied little or nothing of the particularities of the emperor's musical activity¹⁷. However, this was certainly the most important of all his "talents", not just because of its meaning but also because of the ancient authors' emphasis in such aspect. Among the three ancient authors already mentioned here, more passages are dedicated to this subject, namely the ones that deal with Nero *citharoedus*, for they surpass in good part the ones that show him as an actor, for instance. Actually, it is very probable that his dramatic activity was more intense starting only from his trip to Greece, in 66 A.D., and a clue to that is in the own shortage of data on Nero-actor in Tacitus¹⁸ (of whom we do not have the text about this period), at least in proportion to the ones mentioned by Suetonius and Cassius Dio¹⁹. The term *citharoedus* is always present in any situation where somebody criticizes Nero²⁰, and it is used obviously as a great offense than as a characterization of the emperor.

Two aspects are very important when we distinguish the emperor as a musician from him as an actor, or even as a charioteer. All those activities involve a form of communication with the audience, which certainly implies an implicit or explicit intention of the artist and an answer, an identification of the audience with what he means. In the case where the artist is also the emperor, the communication is still much more extraordinary and full of subtleties²¹. In the first place, the musician, unlike the actor, doesn't use a mask, and therefore his identity is clear and directly apprehended. Although Nero did use a mask with his own features, even then his own image passes through a

¹⁷ For Nero as actor, see Catharine Edwards. "Beware of imitations: theatre and the subversion of imperial identity" in: Jas Elsner and Jamie Masters. *Reflections of Nero*. London: Duckworth, 1994. Pp.83-97 and Shadi Bartsch. *Actors in the Audience. Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

¹⁸ Just one mention, in *Annales* 15.59.

¹⁹ Eleven references in both of them: Suetonius. *Nero* 21, 24, 33, two in 38, 39, 44, 45, 46, 53 and 54. Cassius Dio. *Roman History* 61.16.2; 63.8.2-5; 63.9.1-6; 63.10.1-3; 63.12.2; 63.14.3-4; 63.18.1; 63.20.1-6; 63.21.1-3; 63.22.4; 63.28.

²⁰ For instance, in Tacitus. *Annales* 15.65, see note 15 above.

²¹ See Bartsch, op.cit.

codification: he has a role and he reaffirms his identity at the same time. Nero-musician is just the emperor in his plenitude.

Second, the citharoedus is not any kind of musician. He is a virtuoso: the instrument demanded a complex technique and it was intended especially for solo performances in competitions²². Together with the necessary technique for singing and for composition, that was an unique opportunity for Nero to demonstrate his artistic virtues. Therefore a performance of Nero on stage as a musician, especially in a competition, could only demonstrate his own superiority, a virtuoso above all other virtuosi.

Nero's popularity among the plebs, not only of Rome, is still evident, even after his death. An important aspect that demonstrates such phenomenon is shown in our three main historians for his period, who tell us about the appearance of three "false-Neros" at different times²³. Having been reasonably popular especially in Greece and the Eastern part of the Empire, these "false-Neros" had a peculiar characteristic in common, that reveals us again the people's identification with the image of a Nero-musician: besides resembling to him in physical appearance, they were known as skilled singers and citharoedi.

With the establishment of the Flavian dynasty after the civil war of 69 A.D., an entire anti-neronian policy emerged, focused on the elimination of the emperor's memory a positive among the Roman society. For such, several authors contributed, not only in the Flavian period (with works such as, for example, the pseudo-senequian play *Octavia*) but also with the following emperors, as it is the case of Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio's periods. That shows, therefore, the presence of a different approach in Roman society, at least among the elite, to the hellenistic influence that marked the principate of Nero, even to the entire Julio-Claudian period if we consider that the amateur artistic activity of the elite wasn't restricted to his government. That influence would take different forms in the subsequent dynasties, but we can see the case of Nero as paradigmatic of a period that, distinctively inclined to the arts, never came to be repeated again.

²² For a more detailed analysis, see Warren D. Anderson. *Music and Musicians in Ancient Greece*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1994.

²³ Tacitus, *Histories* 2.8 and Suetonius, *Nero* 57.