

NERO: A ROMAN SURENA?

Abstract: Suetonius preserves two short passages purporting to describe Nero's extravagant manner of travel. It is argued that they probably relate to the one alleged incident, when Nero was preparing to launch an expedition against Galba in AD 68, and derive from a source that had sought to depict Nero as behaving more like a Parthian noble, particularly the Surena who had defeated Crassus at Carrhae in 53 BC, than a Roman emperor by this point in his career. This seems to have been in response to his settlement with Parthia over Armenia in AD 63 and his execution of his general Corbulo in AD 67.

Keywords: Nero, Surena, Parthia, travel, Tiridates, Corbulo, concubines, Amazons

Suetonius concludes his list of examples illustrating the extravagant personal expenditure of Nero apart from his hugely expensive building projects with a description of his alleged manner of travel:

*Numquam minus mille carrucis fecisse iter traditur, soleis mularum argenteis, canusinatis mulionibus, armillata phalerataque Mazacum turba atque cursorum.*¹

It is said that he never travelled with less than a thousand carriages, the mules shod with silver, the muleteers dressed in Canusian wool, and with a crowd of Mazaces and couriers decorated with bracelets and ornamental plates.

This claim that Nero never travelled anywhere except in this extravagant fashion is clearly exaggerated. First, it is highly unlikely that Nero's chief advisors, the praetorian prefect Afranius Burrus and the Stoic philosopher Seneca would have allowed such behaviour when they had still exercised some form of control over him, that is, before the death of the former and the retirement from public life of the latter in AD 62.² Next, it is noteworthy that the only other firmly dateable item of extravagant expenditure mentioned by Suetonius in the

1) Suet. Nero 30.3. Ed. R. Kaster, C. Suetoni Tranquilli de Vita Caesarum Libros VIII et de Grammaticis et Rhetoribus Librum, Oxford 2016. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. On the profligacy of Nero, see P. Kragelund, Nero's *Luxuria*, in Tacitus and in the *Octavia*, CQ 50 (2000) 494–515.

2) Tac. Ann. 14.51–56.

same section of text dates to the period after AD 62. In this case, the claim that Nero spent 800,000 sesterces a day on entertaining Tiridates and that he presented him with a gift of more than 100 million sesterces as he left can only refer to the time that Tiridates visited Rome in AD 66 in order to be crowned King of Armenia by Nero himself.³ Thirdly, the only firmly dateable item in the next section of text listing Nero's extravagant building projects, a description of the size and splendour of Nero's new palace, the *domus aurea*, which he began to construct in AD 64, clearly belongs to the same phase of his reign also.⁴ Next, Pliny bemoans the fact that Poppaea Sabina, Nero's wife as he specifically calls her, had her favourite baggage animals shod with gold, a claim that so parallels Suetonius' claim that Nero had his mules shod with silver that it is obvious that both must refer to the same period sometime after the marriage of Nero to Poppaea in AD 62.⁵ Finally, it is noteworthy that Tacitus does not even hint at such an extravagant manner of travel when he describes any of Nero's visits outside of Rome, whether, for example, as far southwards as Naples in AD 59 or to Beneventum in AD 64, although one could perhaps explain such silence as a result of a desire to curtail unnecessary detail in these sections of his text as much as anything else.⁶ The obvious suspicion, therefore, is that, when Suetonius claims that Nero never travelled with less than a thousand carriages or without mules shod with silver, he is generalizing once more on the basis of a single alleged incident, as was his custom, and that this single alleged incident probably occurred, if it occurred at all, sometime during the period AD 66–68.⁷

3) Suet. Nero 30.2. Cf. Dio 63.2.2, 6.5.

4) Suet. Nero 31.1–2. On the beginning of the construction of the *domus aurea* following the great fire at Rome, see Tac. Ann. 15.42.

5) Pliny, NH 33.140. Nero had been involved with Poppaea since AD 58 (Tac. Ann. 13.45–46) before finally marrying her in AD 62 (Tac. Ann. 14.60). On Roman horseshoes, or hipposandals, which were not nailed to the hoof like modern horseshoes but attached by means of cords or leather straps, see e.g. K. R. Dixon / P. Southern, *The Roman Cavalry*, London 1992, 229–233.

6) Tac. Ann. 14.10–13 (return from Naples to Rome); Ann. 15.33–36 (from Rome to Beneventum and back).

7) Examples of generalization include his claim that the emperor Tiberius exiled the Jews of Rome to provinces in the plural in AD 19 (Tib. 36), whereas Tacitus reports that they were sent to Sardinia alone (Ann. 2.85.4). Similarly, he claims that Tiberius ordered young girls due for execution to be raped first because tradition

This suspicion that Suetonius' claim that Nero never travelled with less than a thousand carriages or without mules shod with silver relates to the final years of his life alone is reinforced by the fact the only dateable occasion on which he is known to have travelled in a similarly extravagant manner, or to have planned to do so, occurred shortly after Galba had renounced his allegiance to him in early AD 68. According to Suetonius, Nero then began to prepare to lead an expedition against him, but the preparations were rather unusual:

*In praeparanda expeditione primam curam habuit deligendi vehicula portandis scaenicis organis concubinasque, quas secum educeret, tendendi ad virilem modum et securibus peltisque Amazonicis instruendi.*⁸

In preparing the expedition, his main concern was for the selection of vehicles for the carrying of stage-machinery and the clipping of the concubines whom he was bringing with him in a manly fashion and their equipping with Amazonian axes and shields.

While this description of the manner in which Nero was preparing to travel against Galba does not repeat any of the details as noted by Suetonius in his earlier description of Nero's alleged manner of travel, they both highlight Nero's extravagance, his lack of interest in the practicalities of the task at hand, and his love of exotic display.⁹ As far as practicalities are concerned, the silver shoes of

forbade the execution of virgins (Tib. 61.5), whereas Tacitus knows of only one example of this (Ann. 5.9). In general, see D. Flach, *Zum Quellenwert der Kaiserbiographien Suetons*, *Gymnasium* 79 (1972) 273–289; J. Gascou, *Suétone historien*, Rome 1984 (BEFAR 255), 450–56.

8) Suet. Nero 44.1. Ed. Kaster (n. 1 above). This passage receives minimal analysis in the standard commentaries. See e. g. B. H. Warmington, *Suetonius: Nero*, London ²1999, 81; W. Kierdorf, *Suetonius: Leben des Claudius und Nero*, Paderborn 1992, 224; K. R. Bradley, *Suetonius' Life of Nero: An Historical Commentary*, Brussels 1978 (Collection Latomus 157), 264.

9) One might object to the comparison of these two passages in the present manner on the basis that the description of Nero's method of travel at Nero 30.3 belongs to the civil and private sphere, while that at Nero 44.1 belongs to the military and public sphere. However, given the status of the emperor as commander of the armed forces, the fact that he should have always enjoyed some minimal military escort from his praetorian guard at least, and that travel was by its very nature public, such a distinction is dubious, even before one takes into account Nero's own tendency to muddy it further, as demonstrated, for example, by the nature of the mock triumph that he conducted as he entered Rome following his return from Greece in late AD 67 (Suet. Nero 25; Dio 63.20).

Nero's mules would have worn down much more quickly than the standard iron shoes and were hardly suited to a long journey into Gaul or Spain, while the wagons loaded with stage equipment would have been heavy, bulky and entirely unnecessary. Both would have slowed down his journey. The crowd of highly decorated Mazaces would have added colour to his procession in one case in the same way that the fake Amazons would have added colour to his procession in the other case also. It is entirely possible, therefore, that Suetonius has drawn upon the same source in each case, abstracting different details from it as he sought to use it for two different purposes, a source that had originally described a single alleged incident when Nero had gathered about a thousand wagons drawn by silver-shod mules, many of which wagons carried his theatrical equipment, where the whole lot had been escorted by both Mazaces and concubines dressed as Amazons.¹⁰ Alternatively, he may have drawn material from two different witnesses to the same basic tradition, the variants resulting from different elaborations of the same ultimate account. In either case, however, it is arguable that the two different passages probably refer to the same incident. But did this incident really occur?

There is no need to doubt that Nero did begin preparing for an expedition against Galba from the moment that he heard about his revolt, since that would have been an entirely natural reaction to such news. The real question here is whether, or to what extent, a hostile tradition has misrepresented his efforts to prepare for this expedition whether deliberately with malicious intent or accidentally as a result of ignorance and misunderstanding.¹¹ As already

10) This is characteristic of his approach to his sources. For example, as a comparison with Dio 59.17 reveals, Suetonius abstracts material from his source for Caligula's construction of a bridge of boats at Baiae so as to include it in other thematic sections at Calig. 32.1 and Calig. 52, although it ought more properly to have been included in his main account of this event at Calig. 19.

11) As J. Malitz, *Nero*, Oxford 2005, 104 asks incredulously "is it possible that Nero was really concerned only with his musical equipment, the transportation of the ladies of the court, and the presumably authentic costumes of an Amazon corps?" T. Power, *Collected Papers on Suetonius*, Abingdon 2021, 234–37, unconvincedly argues in support of the "factual credibility" of this account. In fact, all he proves is that it reveals the same hostility towards Nero as do several other anecdotes.

suggested elsewhere, for example, the claim that Nero ordered wagons to be loaded with theatrical equipment may result from a mistranslation of the Greek term *σκηνή*, used to refer either to the wall at the back of a theatre-stage, scenery in the modern sense, or a tent.¹² Hence an author working under the assumption that Nero was obsessed with theatrical performance may well have misunderstood a description of the loading of tents and camping equipment upon carriages in reference to theatrical equipment instead.¹³ Furthermore, if there is any truth at all behind these allegations, the belief that Nero and Poppaea had their mules shod in silver or gold may represent no more than a hostile assumption concerning the nature of horseshoes that were merely silver or golden in colour, that is, designed to imitate silver or gold in order to appear as decorative as possible. Perhaps the best way to answer the question whether, or to what extent, a hostile tradition has misrepresented Nero's actions in this case is by considering what effect such a description of his behaviour might have had on the mind of the ancient reader. What would he or she have thought about Nero after reading an account of his preparations to campaign against Galba much as described by Suetonius?

Anyone reading Suetonius' account of Nero's alleged manner of preparation to campaign against Galba would have been encouraged to condemn such behaviour as wasteful and ridiculous, shameful not just to Nero himself, but to the whole Roman state even. This account seems to illustrate precisely why he deserved to be replaced as emperor. However, there may have been more to the decision to describe his preparation to campaign against Galba in this way than a simple desire to illustrate his wastefulness and ridiculousness once more. After all, his last years were filled with examples of such behaviour and one more example of such was not going to add much, if anything, to the understanding of his character or reign. One needs to consider who else was reputed to have travelled in much the same way as Nero is alleged to have

12) D. Woods, Three Notes on Military Affairs under Nero, *Revue des Études Militaires Anciennes* 3 (2006) 131–50, at 141.

13) On the use of theatricality as a descriptive model for Nero's reign, see S. Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian*, Cambridge, MA, 1994, 1–35.

done, whether any comparison may have been intended between Nero and any of these other figures, and what the purpose of such a comparison may have been.

One should start by noting that Suetonius' does not describe any other emperor travelling in the same or similarly extravagant manner as alleged of Nero. In particular, one may contrast his description of Nero's preparation to travel to Gaul in AD 68 to his brief description of Caligula's journey to Gaul in AD 39 where the only indication of any laziness or love of luxury by Caligula is that he travelled in a sedan carried by eight bearers rather than riding or walking and that he ordered the inhabitants of the towns through which he was passing to dampen the roads to keep down the dust.¹⁴ It is noteworthy also that Suetonius specifically mentions that Caligula was accompanied by the praetorian cohorts on his journey, while he does not mention their presence with Nero as he prepared to travel. This could suggest that his source had wished to de-Romanize the description of Nero's preparation to travel to Gaul for some reason. In contrast to Suetonius, however, Dio characterizes Caligula's journey to Gaul as a more luxurious affair:

οὐ μέντοι καὶ ἀντικρυς τὴν ἕξοδον προεπήγγειλεν, ἀλλ' ἐς προάστειόν τι ἐλθὼν εἶτ' ἐξαιφνης ἀπήρε, πολλοὺς μὲν ὄρχηστὰς πολλοὺς δὲ μονομάχους ἵππους γυναῖκας τὴν ἄλλην τρυφήν ἐπαγόμενος.¹⁵

However, he did not openly announce his expedition beforehand, but went first to one of the suburbs and then suddenly set out on the journey, taking with him many actors, many gladiators, horses, women, and all the other trappings of luxury.

Despite Dio's disapproval, however, this need not have been quite so indulgent an affair as a first reading might suggest. In particular, one notes that Dio refers to the women that accompanied Caligula merely as such, not as concubines, nor as prostitutes. It is arguable, therefore, that these women may simply be identifiable as Caligula's wife and her retinue and that Dio's source had originally objected to their mere presence rather than to their sexual roles.¹⁶ As for the

14) Suet. Calig. 43.

15) Dio 59.21.2. Text and translation from E. Cary, Dio Cassius VII, Cambridge, MA, 1924 (Loeb Classical Library 175), 324–25.

16) The wives of Roman senators had traditionally stayed in Rome while their husbands served in the provinces until Tiberius had relaxed this rule. Never-

reference to horses, the vague implication seems to be that these were Caligula's favourite horses famous for their racing ability rather than everyday animals.¹⁷ Yet it seems eminently sensible that the emperor should have brought horses along to ride for part of the journey at least, that is, when he was not being carried in his sedan. This was not in itself a sign of luxurious living.

One may turn next to Seneca's censorious description of the alleged luxurious manner of travel at the time that he was writing in c. AD 65:

*Omnes iam sic peregrinantur, ut illos Numidarum praecurrat equitatus, ut agmen cursorum antecedit; turpe est nullos esse, qui occurrentis via deiciant, [ut] qui honestum hominem venire magno pulvere ostendant. Omnes iam mulos habent, qui crustallina et murrina et caelata magnorum artificum manu portent; turpe est videri eas te habere sarcinas totas, quae tuto concuti possint. Omnium paedagogia oblita facie vehuntur, ne sol, ne frigus teneram cutem laedat; turpe est neminem esse in comitatu tuo puerorum, cuius sana facies medicamentum desideret.*¹⁸

Everyone now travels with Numidian outriders preceding him, with a troop of slave-runners to clear the way; we deem it disgraceful to have no attendants who will elbow crowds from the road, or will prove, by a great cloud of dust, that a high dignitary is approaching! Everyone now possesses mules that are laden with crystal and myrrhine cups carved by skilled artists of great renown; it is disgraceful for all your baggage to be made up of that which can be rattled along without danger. Everyone has pages who ride along with ointment-covered faces, so that the heat or the cold will not harm their tender complexions; it is disgraceful that none of your attendant slave-boys should show a healthy cheek, not covered with cosmetics.

The claim that all now travelled with Numidian horsemen and *cursores* directly parallels Suetonius' claim that Nero travelled with Mazaces and *cursores*, both describing travel with North African

theless, traditionalists continued to disapprove of their presence in the provinces, particularly if there was any risk that they might become involved in military affairs. See A. J. Marshall, *Roman Women and the Provinces*, *AncSoc* 6 (1975) 109–127.

17) He is even said to have wanted to appoint his favourite horse *Incitatus* as consul. See D. Woods, *Caligula, Incitatus, and the Consulship*, *CQ* 64 (2014) 772–777.

18) Sen. *Epist.* 123.7. Ed. L. D. Reynolds, *L. Annaei Senecae ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, Oxford 1965; translation from R. M. Gummere, *Seneca VI*, Cambridge, MA, 1925 (Loeb Classical Library 77), 426–29.

horsemen as well as *cursores*.¹⁹ The suspicion arises that Suetonius has composed his description of Nero's alleged manner of travel at Nero 30.3 to conform to the sort of behaviour described by Seneca, both drawing on a common stereotype. Furthermore, there is a vague similarity also between Seneca's claim that all now travelled with crystal and myrrhine cups and Suetonius' description of how Nero prepared for his expedition to Gaul in AD 68 by packing his stage equipment in that both describe their subjects taking with them unnecessary baggage symbolic of a decadent lifestyle. Yet there are important differences also. Seneca does not mention concubines, so these were not necessarily part of the stereotype. Nor does he emphasize the sheer size of the escorts accompanying the travellers whom he describes in the same way that Suetonius emphasizes the great size of Nero's escort at Nero 30.3.

As one searches for some other, perhaps better, parallels to Suetonius' descriptions of how Nero was alleged to have travelled, one cannot help but note the striking similarity between Plutarch's description of how the Parthian general Surena, the man who defeated the triumvir Crassus at the battle of Carrhae in 53 BC, was alleged to have travelled and Suetonius' descriptions of how Nero was alleged to have travelled. Plutarch describes Surena's manner of travel as follows:

ἐξήλανε δὲ καθ' ἑαυτὸν αἰεὶ χιλιάς σκευοφορούμενος καμήλοις, καὶ διακοσίας ἀπήνας ἐπήγετο παλλακίδων, ἵππεῖς δὲ κατάφρακτοι χίλιοι, πλείονες δὲ τῶν κούφων παρέπεμπον, εἶχε δὲ τοὺς σύμπαντας ἵππεῖς ὁμοῦ πελάτας τε καὶ δούλους μυρίων οὐκ ἀποδέοντας. κατὰ γένος μὲν οὖν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἐκέκτητο βασιλεῖ γενομένῳ Πάρθων ἐπιτιθέναί τὸ διάδημα πρῶτος, ...²⁰

He used to travel on private business with a baggage train of a thousand camels, and was followed by two hundred waggons for his concubines,

19) Since Seneca is exaggerating for effect, one may doubt whether many really travelled with Numidian horsemen at that time. North African cavalry, whether Numidians or Moors like the Mazaces, enjoyed a reputation as the best light horsemen in the empire. Moors formed an increasingly important part of the *equites singulares Augusti*, the imperial horse-guard, from the reign of Trajan onwards. In general, see M. P. Speidel, *Riding for Caesar: The Roman Emperors' Horse-Guard*, London 1994.

20) Plutarch, *Crassus* 21.6–7. Text and translation from B. Perrin, *Plutarch: Lives III*, Cambridge, MA, 1916 (Loeb Classical Library 65), 378–79.

while a thousand mail-clad horsemen and a still greater number of light-armed cavalry served as his escort; and he had altogether, as horsemen, vassals, and slaves, no fewer than ten thousand men. Moreover, he enjoyed the ancient and hereditary privilege of being first to set the crown upon the head of the Parthian king; ...

The obvious first point of comparison concerns the number of baggage-carriages or baggage-animals, between the thousand carriages ascribed to Nero by Suetonius and the thousand camels ascribed to Surena by Plutarch. Both leaders travel with excessive baggage in a similar display of wealth and power, if not luxury also.

A second point of comparison concerns the emphasis on the presence of a large number of concubines, so many in the case of Nero that he was able to form what seems to have been some form of mock bodyguard out of them, so many in the case of Surena that he needed two hundred wagons for them. This emphasis on the presence of a group of concubines with Nero is particularly interesting, first, because one might have expected that the emphasis would have been on the presence of actors or singers instead, given the previous emphasis on the amount of theatrical equipment that he was supposed to be bringing with him. True, the concubines were equipped as Amazons, and so were engaging in a form of acting, but the fact that they are described as concubines rather than actresses confirms that the emphasis here is on their sexual rather than their theatrical status.²¹ The second reason that this emphasis is interesting is because there is very little evidence that Nero, or any other emperor, did in fact possess a large group of concubines.²² Concubinage was common among all social classes in Roman society, but the retention of a group of concubines, a harem, was not.²³ Claims of retaining a group of concubines were part of the

21) A. Weigall, *Nero Emperor of Rome*, London 1930, 284 identifies the *concubinae* as “chorus-girls” and their weapons as “stage-swords and shields”. Similarly, E. Champlin, *Nero*, Cambridge, MA, 2003, 163, suggests that Nero’s alleged concubines “sound more like a theatrical troupe than a harem”.

22) Suetonius (Nero 28.2) says that Nero added a prostitute who resembled his mother Agrippina to his concubines, but Dio (61.11.4) simply says that he had a mistress resembling Agrippina, with no suggestion that she formed part of some larger group.

23) On concubinage in ancient Rome, see S. Treggiari, *Concubinae*, PBSR 49 (1981) 59–81.

standard invective against those alleged to be dissolute, and some may even have retained such, but such behaviour was exceptional, if it occurred at all. In contrast, the Persians, or Parthians, were so devoted to heterosexual sex that each man possessed multiple wives and even more concubines, or so the Greco-Roman ethnic stereotype alleged.²⁴ Finally, the third reason why the emphasis on the presence of the concubines with Nero is interesting is that their disguise as Amazons, an eastern group who were normally attributed to Scythia, renders Nero's expedition more eastern in appearance than it probably was.²⁵ One might have expected a Parthian ruler to have access to such exotic Scythian allies, but not a Roman ruler (at least not at this early date).

A third point of comparison between how Nero and Surena are alleged to have travelled concerns the presence of an exotic cavalry-guard, whether highly decorated Mazaces in the case of Nero, or the thousand mail-clad horsemen, and even greater number of light-armed cavalry, in the case of Surena. The emphasis is not merely on the presence of a cavalry escort, but on the exotic or distinctive nature of its appearance, whether the African Mazaces with their bracelets and decorative trappings in the case of Nero or mail-clad horsemen in the case of Surena.²⁶ One notes here that there is no other evidence to suggest that Nero, or any of his predecessors, included African cavalry among their personal cavalry bodyguard that was called the *Germani corporis custodes* at this point precisely because it was recruited from Germans in particular.²⁷

The name of Surena would have been familiar to most educated Romans as the Parthian general who had inflicted one of the worst ever defeats upon the Roman army. But why would anyone have wanted to compare Nero to a Parthian, even if only implicitly? There is little evidence that he had any interest in Parthian culture

24) Herodotus 1.135; Strabo 15.3.17; Amm. Marc. 23.6.76. In general, see B. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Princeton 2004, 371–380.

25) On ancient beliefs about the Amazons, see K. Dowden, *Amazons: Development and Functions*, RhM 140 (1997) 96–128.

26) The Romans were very slow to develop their own mailed cavalry, probably not until the early 2nd-century AD. See J. W. Eadie, *The Development of Roman Mailed Cavalry*, JRS 57 (1967) 161–173.

27) In general, see Speidel (n. 19 above) 12–31; H. Bellen, *Die germanische Leibwache der römischen Kaiser des julisch-claudischen Hauses*, Mainz 1981.

or history beyond an interest in the secret arts of the Persian magi.²⁸ And why would they have wanted to compare him to a Parthian general in particular rather than to the King of Parthia himself or to some more infamous figure from the Achaemenid empire of old such as Darius I (522–486 BC) or Xerxes I (486–465 BC), the stock villains of Roman literature when illustrations of pride or excess were needed?²⁹ The answer to that may lie in the treaty that Nero agreed with the Parthian king, Vologeses I, in AD 63 concerning the possession of Armenia and his subsequent treatment of his general Domitius Corbulo who had played such an important role both in the defence of the East against the Parthians since AD 54 and in the negotiation of the final settlement with them concerning Armenia.³⁰ The treaty that Nero agreed with Vologeses through Corbulo stipulated that the Romans would recognize Vologeses' candidate for the throne of Armenia, his brother Tiridates, on condition that he proceeded to Rome in order to receive his crown from Nero himself. In other words, the Parthians received *de facto* possession of Armenia in return for recognising the *de iure* authority of the Romans to appoint its king. This agreement ensured peace between Rome and Parthia until the emperor Trajan invaded and re-occupied Armenia in AD 114, and seems to have made the notoriously philhellene Nero very popular in the eastern half of the empire whose inhabitants had most to lose in the case of renewed conflict between Parthia and Rome.³¹ Furthermore, the magnificent cele-

28) Pliny, NH 30.14–17. The idea by H. P. L'Orange, *Domus Aurea: der Sonnenpalast*, Symbolae Osloenses 11 (1942) 68–100 that Nero built his *domus aurea* according to a Parthian model is no longer credible. See e. g. S. Van Overmeire, *According to the Habit of Foreign Kings: Nero, Ruler Ideology, and the Hellenistic Monarchs*, *Latomus* 71 (2012) 753–779.

29) On the depiction of Xerxes in Roman literature, see E. Bridges, *Imagining Xerxes: Ancient Perspectives on a Persian King*, London 2015, 157–90.

30) On Corbulo, see R. Syme, *Domitius Corbulo*, *JRS* 60 (1970) 27–39. On his eastern campaigns, see K. G. Wallace, *Corbulo's Campaigns in the East. An Analysis of Tacitus' Account*, *Historia* 22 (1973) 583–626.

31) On relations between Rome and Parthia, see J. M. Schlude, *Rome, Parthia, and the Politics of Peace: The Origins of War in the Ancient Middle East*, Abingdon 2020. The popularity of Nero in the East can be judged from the fact that it produced three pretenders claiming to be him during the later 1st-century AD. See C. J. Tuplin, *The False Neros of the First Century AD*, in: C. Deroux (ed.), *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History V*, Brussels 1989 (Collection Latomus 206),

brations that Nero staged at Rome in order to receive Tiridates, accept his ritual submission, and crown him as King of Armenia, may well have given the impression – and may have been deliberately intended to give this impression – that Nero had achieved much more than he actually had by his settlement with the Parthians. However, one may doubt that all Romans, least of all the military and political elite, were so easily impressed by an agreement that did not add a single acre to the empire after so many years of war and did nothing to avenge even their most recent defeat at the battle of Rhandaia in AD 62, not to mention their older defeats as far back as Carrhae itself in 53 BC.³²

This brings one to the most interesting point of comparison between Nero and Surena, the fact that Nero personally placed the crown on the head of Tiridates, a brother of the King of Parthia, in order to crown him as King of Armenia, while, as Plutarch notes at the end of his description of the manner in which Surena was accustomed to travel, Surena enjoyed the hereditary right to be the first to crown a King of Parthia. This comparison is interesting because it completely inverts the symbolism intended by Nero in his insistence that he personally should crown Tiridates as king. He had clearly intended this to project himself as the superior figure conferring a honour upon an inferior figure, but a comparison with Surena's right to crown the King of Parthia, illustrates how the same objective reality could be interpreted in a very different way, as the inferior figure acting as the servant of his superior by placing the crown upon his head.

364–404. On his philhellenism, see S. Mratschek, *Nero the Imperial Misfit: Philhellenism in a Rich Man's World*, in: M. Dinter / E. Buckley (eds.), *Companion to the Neronian Age*, Malden, MA, 2013, 45–62.

32) The Parthians had forced Lucius Caesennius Paetus to surrender at Rhandaia in AD 62 (*Tac. Ann.* 15.13–15), and Corbulo was happy to agree the new settlement with Parthia near there in AD 63 (*Tac. Ann.* 15.28) because that allowed him to contrast his success to the previous defeat, but this stage-management could not really disguise the fact that the defeat of Paetus was left unavenged. See F.J. Vervaet, *Caesennius Sospes, the Neronian Wars in Armenia and Tacitus' View on the Problem of Roman Foreign Policy in the East: a Reassessment*, *Mediterraneo Antico* 5 (2002) 283–318 in support of the idea that Tacitus belonged to the moderate party as far as Rome's eastern policy was concerned and wrote favourably about Corbulo's withdrawal from Armenia in order to demonstrate his support of Hadrian's withdrawal from the eastern conquests of Trajan.

The idea that Nero was behaving as a servant of the King of Parthia, like Surena, rather than as a Roman emperor would have been encouraged by his role in the death of Corbulo. Despite the fact that Corbulo had repeatedly shown himself to be one of his ablest and most loyal generals, Nero summoned him to his presence in early AD 67 during his continued tour of Greece with the intention of having him executed.³³ However, Corbulo realised what was about to happen at the last minute, seized a sword, and committed suicide by stabbing himself rather than let himself be killed by another. It is not entirely clear why Nero suddenly turned against Corbulo at this point, although he may have come to suspect his loyalty due to the involvement of several members of his family in the Pisonian conspiracy of AD 65.³⁴ The key point here, however, is that Corbulo had done more than any other figure to resist Parthian efforts to take Armenia by force. He had campaigned successfully there against the Parthians during the period before the settlement was reached. He also remained vigilant subsequently, as demonstrated by the fact that, when Tiridates was returning to Armenia after his coronation in Rome, he prevented him from taking any skilled craftsmen with him back into Armenia except those whom Nero had specifically allowed him to take with him.³⁵ Nero's execution of Corbulo certainly removed an important potential threat to the Parthians should they have decided to return to the offensive against the Roman empire, and was all too easily characterized as a victory for the Parthians for this reason. Like Surena in 53 BC, Nero had defeated the Roman commander posing the greatest threat to the Parthian empire, even if in rather different circumstances.

It is my argument, therefore, that Suetonius' description of the manner in which Nero prepared an expedition against Galba in AD 68 preserves a fragment from a source that had attempted to characterize Nero as the leading servant of the King of Parthia, like Surena in 53 BC, rather than as a true Roman emperor. This source had presumably sought to characterize Nero's settlement

33) Dio 63.17.5–6.

34) See F.J. Vervaet, *Domitius Corbulo and the Senatorial Opposition to the Reign of Nero*, *AncSoc* 32 (2002) 135–193.

35) Dio 63.6.6.

with the Parthians in AD 63 as a shameful surrender, his behaviour in crowning Tiridates as King of Armenia in AD 66 as the act of a leading Parthian noble in the manner of Surena, and his execution in AD 67 of Corbulo, the distinguished Roman general who had done so much to contain Parthian expansion, as a due act of service for his Parthian master. According to this manner of thinking, Nero's decision to campaign against Galba, that is, to pursue a civil-war that would dangerously weaken the empire rather than to abdicate or to compromise in some other manner, was but the latest in a chain of events in which he had acted to serve Parthian rather than Roman interests. Hence the author of this source seems to have decided to describe Nero's preparations for his expedition against Galba as if he were a senior Parthian noble, Surena himself even, in order to make this point. He did not necessarily mean to imply that Nero was actively and consciously working in the interests of the Parthian empire, but that his actions did very much benefit it nonetheless. Nor did he necessarily mean to imply that Nero had always behaved in this manner. The idea was probably only that Nero had become like a servant of the Parthian king by the last years of his reign rather than that he had always been so. The characterization of Nero in this manner was probably only a minor theme of this author's anti-Neronian propaganda for this reason, but no less powerful for that.

Cork

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