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## Nero's Retinue in Greece, A.D. 66/67

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The full significance of Nero's visit to Greece in A.D. 66/67 will probably never be known because a complete account of the episode has not survived among the ancient literary sources.<sup>1</sup> Quite clearly, however, Nero's behaviour as aesthete and sportsman did nothing to halt the deterioration of relations between emperor and senate that went back to the early sixties, not to mention the political removal of Cn. Domitius Corbulo and the Sulpicii Scribonii.<sup>2</sup> But one subject on which there is a relatively plentiful supply of information is the composition of the imperial retinue which accompanied Nero on the tour. The purpose of this paper is to draw that information together and to offer the suggestion that the location of Nero's court and the political importance of its members contributed to and aggravated the decline of Nero's stock with the senate in Rome.

Most of the material on the identities of the individuals who accompanied Nero to Greece comes from the epitomated account of the tour of Dio Cassius, whose jaundiced view of the whole expedition is made very clear from the start (63.8.3). It is not always certain from this that everyone mentioned was a member of the imperial entourage, but most cases can probably be assumed so. Thus, the first names to appear are those of Terpnus, Diodorus and Pammenes (Dio 63.8.4), musicians who were defeated by Nero in Greece; there follow the imperial freedman Phoebus

<sup>1</sup> On the Hellenic tour generally see B. W. Henderson, *The Life and Principate of the Emperor Nero* (London, 1903), 382 ff.; A. Garzetti, *From Tiberius to the Antonines* (London, 1974), 181 ff.

<sup>2</sup> An absolutely fixed date for a breach between Nero and the senate is not likely, but for the various possibilities see M. T. Griffin, *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford, 1976), 423 ff. On the political side of Nero's aestheticism see C. E. Manning, "Acting and Nero's Conception of the Principate," *G&R* 22 (1975), 164 ff.; for the deaths, Dio 63.17.2-6.

(63.10.1<sup>a</sup>), who is shown influencing access to the emperor; Calvia Crispinilla (63.12.3-4), who is described as wardrobe mistress and chaperone of the eunuch, and Nero's homosexual partner, Sporus; Sporus himself; Pythagoras (63.13.2), another homosexual partner of Nero; the imperial herald Cluvius Rufus (63.14.3); the praetorian prefect Ofonius Tigellinus (63.12.3-4); and from a later portion of Dio's history (66.11.2) the future emperor Vespasian is named as a member of the retinue. Vespasian's presence is also attested by Josephus (*BJ* 3.1.3) and by Suetonius, who describes him as being *inter comites Neronis* (*Vesp.* 4.4; cf. 5.4). Phoebus' name might also be confirmed if the story of Tac. *Ann.* 16.5.5 belongs to Greece, which it might (cf. Suet. *Vesp.* 4.4; Dio 66.11.2). Philostratus (*VA* 5.7) gives the name of Terpnus and that of another apparent musician, Amoebeus (though the source is not especially reliable), while the presence with Nero of his wife Statilia Messalina is made clear from inscriptional sources.<sup>3</sup>

This list of personnel is not likely to have composed the full retinue, for Suetonius' text at *Vesp.* 4.4 (above) implies the presence of others like Vespasian, Cluvius Rufus and Tigellinus among the *comites*, men, that is, of senatorial or equestrian status; but other names are not available. As it is, freedmen seem to predominate in the list and this may not be altogether fortuitous;<sup>4</sup> indeed, other freedmen are likely to have been with Nero, for one would expect the presence of the *a libellis*, Epaphroditus, and the *ab epistulis*, whose name however is not known at this point in time.<sup>5</sup> In any case, the identifiable members of the entourage were supplemented by Nero's crowd of cheerleaders, the Augustiani (said to number five thousand), members of the praetorian guard and, perhaps, the German imperial bodyguard.<sup>6</sup> The full entourage was thus enormous, and in the tradition as worthy of contempt as the emperor himself.<sup>7</sup> But a closer look at some of the individuals whose names have been listed reveals a greater collective importance than at first appears from the hostile tradition.

In spite of Dio's description of her duties Calvia Crispinilla cannot have been a woman of no consequence: she was well born and in the later crisis of 68 was sufficiently trusted by Nero to be sent on a mission of some political importance, an attempt to deal with the rebellious Clodius Macer in Africa.<sup>8</sup> Dio's story of her rapacity in Greece (63.12.3), even if

<sup>3</sup> See further below. Amoebeus may be the person mentioned at Ath. 14.623 d.

<sup>4</sup> For the predominance of freedmen late in Nero's reign see Griffin, *op. cit.*, 108.

<sup>5</sup> Epaphroditus, *PIR*<sup>2</sup> E 69; on the attendance of secretaries, Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London, 1977), 69 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Dio 63.8.3; Suet. *Nero* 20.3; 19.2; Millar, *op. cit.*, 62 f.      <sup>7</sup> Dio 63.8.3-4.

<sup>8</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> C 363; *AJP* 93 (1972), 451 ff.

exaggerated, is surely an indication that the emperor was well disposed towards her and suggests that she had influence with him. His wife, Statilia Messalina, must also have had influence. Her presence on the tour has sometimes been doubted,<sup>9</sup> but she was probably included in the sacrifices of the Arval Brethren made for Nero's return and departure in 66,<sup>10</sup> while the people of Acraephia honoured both Nero and Augusta Messalina after the liberation of Greece in 67.<sup>11</sup> This can only mean that she was with Nero, as indeed one would expect under immediate circumstances: Nero had married Messalina in 66, shortly before the Hellenic tour began, but a liaison between them extended back in time; a proposed alliance with Claudius' daughter Antonia, the probable basis of which had been concern for the succession, had not proved viable,<sup>12</sup> and this made Statilia's presence in Greece compelling, because it was impossible that all thought of a successor be neglected by Nero. His homosexual relationships should not of course be thought to preclude this.

By 66, when the tour of Greece began, Vespasian had a considerable record of achievement behind him despite insignificant prospects at the outset of his senatorial career: before the consulship of 51 he had established a military reputation in Germany and Britain; and although the enmity of Agrippina had delayed further progress during the early years of Nero's reign, the proconsulate of Africa which was held in the early sixties marks his return to imperial favour.<sup>13</sup> Later propaganda made Vespasian's attendance on Nero in Greece appear ridiculous;<sup>14</sup> but there must have been more to Vespasian's selection as *comes*, as the propaganda itself and his subsequent treatment of Neronian favourites show (below). One should remember that the Hellenic tour was originally intended as part of a more extensive expedition in the eastern Mediterranean and that plans of conquest were in the air.<sup>15</sup> Under these circumstances it is hard to believe that Vespasian was a purely random choice for the retinue; and of course he was very conveniently available when the Jewish problem required an extraordinary appointment.<sup>16</sup> It is thus beyond doubt that Vespasian was closely connected to Nero in 66/67.

The same is probably true for Cluvius Rufus, also a consular by 66.<sup>17</sup> The position of imperial herald was not usually held by a senator, but

<sup>9</sup> A. Momigliano, *CAH X* (1934), 735 n. 1; cf. Garzetti, *op. cit.*, 181.

<sup>10</sup> E. M. Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Gaius, Claudius and Nero* (Cambridge, 1967), 26.

<sup>11</sup> *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 814. <sup>12</sup> See "Nero and Claudia Antonia," *SO* 52 (1977), 79 ff.

<sup>13</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> F 398; Griffin, *op. cit.*, 241 f.; 452 f.

<sup>14</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 16.5; Suet. *Vesp.* 4.4; Dio 66.11.2.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Garzetti, *op. cit.*, 181 f.

<sup>16</sup> See further below.

<sup>17</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> C 1206.

rather than reflecting adversely on him this should be put down to Rufus' credit. He had a reputation for eloquence,<sup>18</sup> which could easily lead to influence with the emperor; and his proximity to Nero is signified by the claim in a later age that he had not used his influence to cause anyone harm.<sup>19</sup> One wonders though about his blamelessness; Dio hints<sup>20</sup> at Nero's susceptibility to informers while in Greece, and there was surely more to the removal of Corbulo and the Scribonii than imperial whim. Rufus may have figured here, as may Tigellinus, whose political status with and military importance to Nero hardly calls for emphasis; it is enough to note Dio's comment (63.12.3) that he was constantly in the emperor's presence all through the tour of Greece.<sup>21</sup>

There is not a great deal of information on the freedmen present with Nero, but there are nevertheless some intimations of the power their closeness to the emperor could produce. L. Domitius Paris was apparently put to death in Greece, but the motive of jealousy ascribed to Nero for this by Dio and Suetonius is suspicious.<sup>22</sup> Tacitus makes it clear that Paris owed his position with Nero to his talents as an actor, and the relationship was of longstanding.<sup>23</sup> Early in the reign Paris had been involved in an accusation against Agrippina contrived by Junia Silana;<sup>24</sup> the freedman had been convincing in his role as denunciator, and this combination of artistic interests and palace intrigue was not to be taken lightly. Pammenes is known from Dio simply as an aged citharoedus not liked by Nero, though this should not exclude him from the retinue. It is tempting, in fact, to identify him with the astrologer known from Tacitus,<sup>25</sup> and if correct this makes Pammenes also a figure tied to court politics; for in 66 the exiled Antistius Sossianus drew on the astrologer's knowledge in order to bring charges against those responsible for his own relegation.<sup>26</sup> In the troubled atmosphere of the mid-sixties it is not impossible that Nero wished to have close to him a man who could produce imperial horoscopes, at least as a precautionary measure; Pammenes' association with Sossianus would make much better sense of Nero's distaste for him than aesthetic rivalry alone. Diodorus was another citharoedus defeated by Nero in Greece, but he did not lose favour as a result; he accompanied the emperor upon the entry to Italy and Rome in 68 and, remarkably, was later given financial rewards by Vespasian when emperor.<sup>27</sup> So too was

<sup>18</sup> Tac. *Hist.* 4.43.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Dio 63.17.3-4.

<sup>21</sup> On Tigellinus cf. Griffin, *op. cit.*, 90.

<sup>22</sup> Dio 63.18.1; Suet. *Nero* 54.

<sup>23</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 13.20.1; 22.3.

<sup>24</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 13.19-22.

<sup>25</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 16.14.1; cf. *PIR*<sup>1</sup> P 56; 55.

<sup>26</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 16.14.

<sup>27</sup> Dio 63.20.3; Suet. *Vesp.* 19.1.

the third defeated citharoedus, Terpnus, also a longtime favourite of Nero.<sup>28</sup> Phoebus was also well treated by Vespasian, though in a different way; he had been powerful enough under Nero to reproach the future emperor for indiscretion, though Vespasian did not take any later action against him for this.<sup>29</sup>

Nero's entourage was a diverse body. But the common features which united people of different social status and function were the important ones of having immediate access to the emperor and the capacity to exert influence upon him. Routine and serious business still had to be conducted in Greece by Nero, and although the sources do not show a lot of interest in this, there are signs that decisions were being made. When the governorships of Upper and Lower Germany were left vacant by the deaths of the Scribonii, they were filled by the new appointments of C. Verginius Rufus and Fonteius Capito.<sup>30</sup> The latter was probably one of the *consules ordinarii* of 67, but he had left office by 20 June of that year,<sup>31</sup> presumably to take up the German command. Likewise, C. Cestius Gallus is not on record in his province of Syria after the autumn of 67, and he was probably replaced late in the same year by C. Licinius Mucianus.<sup>32</sup> The appointment of Vespasian to the Jewish war, moreover, was made early in 67.<sup>33</sup> Military appointments such as these had to continue to be made, but what is significant is that only the emperor could make them. In the province itself, when news of an uncomfortable situation in Rome reached Nero from Helius, Suetonius' quotation of an imperial rescript in reply indicates that the emperor was receiving correspondence as normal;<sup>34</sup> and at least one embassy, of Jews, appeared before him in Greece.<sup>35</sup> Further, the project to cut a canal through the isthmus at Corinth had a serious side to it and is suggestive of previous careful consideration.<sup>36</sup> And it is similarly instructive that when Nero died in 68, it was known that arrangements for the holding of the consulship had been made by him for some time ahead;<sup>37</sup> this procedure, and the planning involved, must have been applied retrospectively too.

<sup>28</sup> Suet. *Vesp.* 19.1; *Nero* 20.1; cf. Philostr. *VA* 5.7.

<sup>29</sup> See n. 14.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. E. Ritterling, *Fasti des röm. Deutschland unter dem Prinzipat* (Vienna, 1932), 17 ff.; 51 ff.

<sup>31</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> F 468; cf. A 1580 (L. Aurelius Priscus).

<sup>32</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> C 691; L 216; cf. K. Wellesley, *Cornelius Tacitus: The Histories III* (Sydney, 1972), 232; G. E. F. Chilver, *JRS* 47 (1957), 32.

<sup>33</sup> E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, revised and edited by G. Vermes and F. Millar (Edinburgh, 1973), 491.

<sup>34</sup> Suet. *Nero* 23.1.

<sup>35</sup> Jos. *BJ* 2.556.

<sup>36</sup> Suet. *Nero* 19.2; B. Gerster, *BCH* 8 (1884), 225 ff.

<sup>37</sup> Tac. *Hist.* 1.77.

If business such as this simply could not be neglected, the only advisers available to Nero on whom he could draw for opinions (whether or not they were followed) were the people present in the retinue, who, in effect, came to form the government of the Empire. The entourage, however, was an exclusive body, composed of individuals who have a collective history of involvement in court politics, and it had the capacity to block all access to the emperor.<sup>38</sup> Now the mobility of the court throughout imperial history has been shown to be something characteristic of the way in which government functioned;<sup>39</sup> but this broad view tends to underestimate the element of time for immediate political contexts. What is unusual in this case is that, from a narrower viewpoint, Nero's tour of Greece was the first occasion on which the emperor and his court had been out of Italy since Claudius' expedition to Britain, more than twenty years before. From the senate's vantage point in Rome, the situation must have recalled the earlier experience with Tiberius on that emperor's withdrawal to Capri; for there was no way of telling how long Nero would be away from Rome and Italy: when he did return, it was clearly a sudden move on his part.<sup>40</sup> Nothing in actuality could demonstrate the powerlessness of the senate as a bloc more than the display of power by the emperor from the provinces and the display of influence, real or imagined, by those with him, particularly freedmen. On this basis it seems plausible that Nero's eventual loss of support among the upper sections of Roman society while he was in Greece was due, not to the actions of Helius and Polyclitus in the capital alone, nor just to the execution of prominent members of the senate and his own "unimperial" behaviour, but also to the resentment against the emperor and his retinue felt by those who found themselves in no position to make recommendations or overtly influence what decisions were being made while Nero was in Greece. It is worth the final observation that no emperor after Nero again left Italy before Domitian went on campaign, almost twenty years later.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Dio 63.17.4.

<sup>39</sup> Millar, *op. cit.*, 59 ff.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Dio 63.19.1.

<sup>41</sup> For which cf. Garzetti, *op. cit.*, 286 ff.