

## Nero: The Artist, the Athlete and His Downfall

John Mouratidis,  
Visiting Lecturer of Physical Education,  
McGill University\*

Modern scholars agree that the descriptions of Nero's character and actions by the ancient historians form a one-sided picture and one far from the truth.<sup>1</sup> So they have attempted, since the beginning of this century, to reinstate Nero from the degradation and disgrace into which the Roman historians forced him. Nero, some believed, never committed a crime for pleasure, but only when frightened,<sup>2</sup> "though he got frightened easily."<sup>3</sup>

The Roman historians had good reason to write against Nero because their traditions and their class were tarnished by the emperor in many ways. Their descriptions of Nero and his actions promoted the image of his excessive cruelty. Some of their narrations of his crimes and eccentricities are sensational and their judgement of him is not accurate, since they often formed opinions about the emperor on the basis of very limited information, or asserted as facts things that were no more than rumors.

The Christian writers of the later ages joined the ancient historians in their condemnation of Nero and his actions because the emperor's terrible persecution of the Christian community of Rome caused the deaths of many Christian martyrs; the Christians never forgot their first persecutor. In fact, Nero's oppression is the first recorded against the Christians and served as a prototype for the later executioners of Christians. When Christianity became the faith of the empire, Nero became "the Beast" and "the Antichrist" in the minds of the

---

\* I am grateful for useful criticism and suggestions of anonymous reviewers of this journal.

1. See J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from Arcadius to Irene* (London, 1889), p. 87; B. W. Henderson, *The Life and Principate of the Emperor Nero* (London, 1903), pp. 421-423; J. D. Bolton, "Was the Neronia a Freak Festival?" *Classical Quarterly* 42 (1948): 82-90; M. F. Gyles, "Nero, Qualis Artifex?" *Classical Journal* 57 (1962): 193-200; F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 42-43; E. M. Sanford, "Nero and the East," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 48 (1937): 75; Gilbert Charles Picard, *Auguste et Néron* (Paris, 1962), p. 89; Denis Van Berchem, *Les Distributions de Blé et d'Argent à la Plèbe Romaine sous l'Empire* (Genève, 1939), p. 75; Eugen Cizek, *L'Époque de Néron et ses Controverses Ideologiques* (Leiden, 1972), pp. 21-30; H. Bardon, "Les Poésies de Néron," *Revue des Etudes Latines* 14 (1936): 337; Michael Grant, *Nero: Emperor in Revolt* (New York, 1970), pp. 94, 104; Gerald Walter, *Nero*, translated by Emma Craufurd (London, 1957), pp. 5-6; Jean Beaujeu, "L'Incendie de Rome en 64 et les Chrétiens," *Latomus* 49 (1960): 47; M. P. Charlesworth, "Nero: Some Aspects," *Journal of Roman Studies* 40 (1950): 69-76; P. A. Brunt, "The Revolt of Vindex and the Fall of Nero," *Latomus* 18 (1959): 531-559; J. Wankenne, "Faut-il Réhabiliter l'Empereur Néron?" *Les Etudes Classiques* 49 (1981): 135-152.

2. Grant, *Nero*, p. 15; Picard, *Auguste et Néron*, p. 142; also see G. Walter, *Nero* (p. 5) who says that it would have been impossible for Nero to avoid his crimes and that "Nero had no choice but to employ the sanguinary means he did."

3. Grant, *Nero*, p. 15.

believers.<sup>4</sup> With all due caution and without trying to overstate the case, it might be said that Nero's history has been written by his enemies, who perpetuated and furthered his reputation as a "monster" and "Antichrist."

One of the many ways that the old Roman traditions were tarnished by Nero was his dedication to artistic and athletic excellence, and his appearance as a competitor in the games or on the stage.<sup>5</sup> The emperor and the Roman conservatives had two different concepts of what was good, decent and beautiful. He sought recognition and fame through competition in the games, a challenge that had been with him since childhood. He believed that nobility and athletic excellence are one, and the accomplishment of this goal would give his life meaning. Chariot driving charmed the emperor in such a way that Nero believed, as the flatterers hailed him, that he was a new Apollo. Nero was convinced that if he failed to achieve artistic and athletic glory he was a failure as an emperor and as a Roman. His association with athletes and artists and his attraction to the theatre and the gymnasium were dictated by his deep love and admiration for Greek culture. The achievement of artistic and athletic fame formed and fashioned his mind and directed his actions through intrigues, anxieties and dangers. Military ambitions and victories had never entered into his dreams. Throughout his short life, training for games and arts occupied a good share of his endeavor.

Nero was always favorably disposed toward those who shared his interests, and demonstrated his resentment against those who opposed them. It is not surprising then that he had from the very beginning attracted enemies as well as friends. He had been reared in an aristocratic Roman tradition like his predecessors but he did not follow the traditional footsteps of his ancestors. He preferred the double life of an artist and athlete, a road which was blocked by strong traditional barriers.<sup>6</sup> The tensions and conflicts between Nero and the conservative Roman elements were unavoidable since the emperor's appearance on the stage and his competition in the Games contradicted the Roman definition of an emperor.

In the eyes of the traditionalists, artists and athletes were despised and dishonorable criminals, slaves, or professionals. This was the group of men the emperor wanted to defend and compete with in the Circus, the gymnasium and the theatre. There was an appreciation and gentleness in Nero's treatment of this group of men that the patrician section of the society held in disrepute. The emperor's attitudes toward this group never changed since childhood; he was highly committed to these attitudes and the efforts of advisors and his mother to the contrary were totally fruitless. The emperor did not conform with the Roman

---

4. In the Revelation of St. John the author mentions a human "Beast" (probably Nero) whose number is 666. See *Revelation* 13.3; 13.18. Historians generally recognized Nero as the "Apocalyptic Beast." Nero has been accused, on doubtful evidence, of causing the great fire of Rome See Tacitus *Annals* 13.20; 14.2: 15.38; 15.39: 15.40; Suet, *Nero* 16, 18; Dio Cassius 62.16-18; Pliny *NH* 17.5. Nero accused the Christians of starting the great fire of Rome in A.D. 64 and ridiculed their faith on stage with mimes and pantomines.

5. For references on Roman dislike of Greek athletics see: R.S. Robinson, *Sources for the History of Greek Athletics* (Chicago, 1955), pp. 164-165.

6. Roman citizens were prohibited from appearing on the stage, on pain of losing citizenship. See J. P. V. D. Balsdon. *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome* (London, 1969) p. 279.

standards and various efforts were made to get him to conform; but neither counsel of caution nor fear deterred him. He was a stubborn and idealistic man with some emotional problems, apparently due to his repressed childhood which had undergone profound disturbances under the constant threat of his mentally disturbed uncle Caligula.

Nero's excessive love for athletic and artistic glory made it difficult for him to come to grips with the Roman reality. He lived in a world of dreams where many elements of reality were not present. It is not then surprising that he sometimes could not deal intelligently with his problems. By isolating himself from the Roman conservative elements he became vulnerable to attack. These elements did not yield to their emperor's pursuits without a struggle. They suffered many losses as a result of their confrontation with Nero, but finally destroyed him. Both the Roman conservatives and their emperor paid dearly with their lives, the first for their adherence to tradition and principles, the latter for his excessive love of Greek games and arts. It was this complicated and unexplained love that finally defeated him. Nero entered forbidden realms and had to pay the price.

It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that Nero was a dedicated artist and athlete and that this dedication contributed much to his downfall.

Nero was born in December, A.D. 37 and died in A.D. 68. He became emperor in A.D. 54 and showed from the beginning modesty, liberality and clemency by his disinclination to sign death penalties, by his generosity to the Roman people and to distinguished, but impoverished senators, and by lowering some of the heavier taxes.<sup>7</sup> A remark attributed to the emperor Trajan has been interpreted as saying that the first five years of Nero's reign excelled the government of all other emperors.<sup>8</sup> He was a moderate and handsome young man of rather athletic frame but entirely under his mother's influence. He was only seventeen when he became emperor and his mother Agrippina believed that she could run the affairs of Rome through her son. The emperor's first years were to be guarded carefully from all influences that might seem in any way harmful. He was exposed to advice which was not in agreement with his athletic and artistic pursuits. Not surprisingly, this exposure had no effect whatsoever. There is little doubt that his tutor, Seneca, provided worldly advice on imperial behavior and taught Nero the art of rhetoric,<sup>9</sup> but there is nothing to indicate that the philosopher influenced his student on matters of Greek theatre or Greek athletics and competition. Agrippina, indeed, could not tolerate anything of that kind. It has been said that one of the causes of Agrippina's quarrels with her son was her opposition to his artistic and athletic interests.<sup>10</sup> Nero rid himself of any who stood in his way and his mother was no exception. The emperor soon

---

7. *Suet. Nero* 10.16.

8. Sextus Aurelius Victor, a fourth-century epitomist, reported Trajan's saying (See *De Caes.* 5.2). For more on Nero's first five years or the "Quinquennium Neronis," see J. G. C. Anderson, "Trajan on the Quinquennium Neronis," *Journal of Roman Studies* 1 (1911-12): 173-179; F. A. Lepper, "Some Reflections on the 'Quinquennium Neronis,'" *Journal of Roman Studies* 47 (1957): 95-103. Many modern writers believe that Nero's reign commenced well. See H.H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero* (London, 1963), p. 315.

9. Grant, *Nero*, p. 27.

10. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, p. 318

realized the enormity of his crime and this tragedy shocked him severely. Agrippina's death was one of the most atrocious crimes of the ancient world and our sources are in agreement in their account of it, from the terrifying attempts of Agrippina to maintain her hold on Nero, to the execution of the murder." Ancient and modern writers also agree that this single tragedy haunted the emperor throughout his life.

After Agrippina's death Nero gave full reign to his athletic and artistic interests. The murder of his mother meant freedom to alter the Roman Games and to bring them as close as possible to the Greek, and to reform the education of the young Roman nobles on the Greek pattern.<sup>12</sup> After Nero's release from his mother's dominating influence, his first duty was to institute new games and display his talent.<sup>13</sup> Neither Seneca nor Burrus, Nero's tutor and advisor for many years, could turn his mind in other directions. They acted rather carefully to avoid losing much of their influence by pressing the emperor too far. Apparently they knew that any direct pressure on the emperor to abandon his pursuits would have been strongly resented. Seneca exercised only indirect pressure on Nero by disapproving of people who admired the physical qualities of every athlete as soon as he made his appearance.<sup>14</sup>

Seneca, Burrus, and Agrippina probably expected that Nero would abandon his tastes and inclinations toward Greek culture if informed that his tastes were altogether groundless. If this was their assessment of the situation it was superficial and faulty. The glory of athletes and actors numbered very high among the values of the emperor who never changed his mind, or diverted himself to another quest or venture. Particularly after Agrippina's death, both Seneca and Burrus found it impossible to influence Nero. Their lack of direct pressure on the emperor to abandon his pursuits has been taken as an encouragement for his interests. Dio said that Seneca and Burrus stood in the "Youth Games" beside Nero "like teachers prompting him; and they would wave their arms and togas at every utterance of his and lead others to do the same."<sup>15</sup> Dio was both right and wrong for these two men had no other choice but to show that their emperor's interests were not so bad after all. Tacitus made it clear by saying that Burrus grieved for Nero's appearances and yet applauded.<sup>16</sup>

Nero's love for competition and public appearance was due to his belief in himself as an athlete, singer, and poet, and to his passion for Greek athletics and arts. He showed very early his love and admiration for all things Greek and he wanted to introduce Greek culture into Rome by including athletic and artistic

---

11. A. Garretti, *From Tiberius to the Antonines* (London, 1974), p. 155.

12. Amaldo Momigliano, "Nero" *The Cambridge Ancient History* edited by S. A. Cook, F. E. Adcock, M. P. Charlesworth (Cambridge, 1934), Vol. X, Chapter XXI, p. 717.

13. M. P. Charlesworth, "Nero: Some Aspects," *Journal of Roman Studies* 40 (1950): 70. Also see Grant, Nero, p. 89, who says: "For Nero Agrippina's disappearance chiefly meant that he was now able, without feeling inhibited or irritated by her disapproval, to plunge into the activities which she despised and he enjoyed more than anything else in the world: singing, acting, and chariot-racing."

14. Seneca *De Brevitate Vitae*, 12.3 For Seneca's dislike of athletes see *Epist.* 13.2; 15.2; 80.1-3; 89.18-19; *De Benef.* 5.3.

15. Dio 62.20.

16. Tacitus *Annals* 14.15.

competitions in his games. The Romans were not untouched by the influence of Greek culture. By the time of Nero, Rome was already exposed to Greek life styles, customs and games.<sup>17</sup> Many educated Romans admitted the primacy of Greece in almost all areas of literature and the arts; but at the same time the influence of Greek culture was regarded as corruptive, subversive, or both.<sup>18</sup> To reprehend and disapprove something new as “Greek” was for long the last resort of Roman disdain.<sup>19</sup> This Roman disesteem and disinclination toward Greek culture was not shared by the emperor. He wanted to Hellenize Roman society<sup>20</sup> and introduce games on the Greek pattern. By his personal participation in them he clearly marked the path by which the acceptance of Greek sports, games and arts could be achieved. He was impressed by the Greeks and their culture and he thought highly of them. “The Greeks,” he said, “alone are worthy of my efforts, they really listen to music.”<sup>21</sup>

Nero instituted games and tried to organize the young men for their practice; he even founded imperial schools for athletic and musical practice and instruction.\*\* In addition he built a magnificent gymnasium in Rome in the Field of Mars, as well as the best baths of their kind. Martial could hide neither his admiration for the new baths nor his contempt for the emperor by declaring “What is worse than Nero? What is better than Nero’s Baths?”<sup>23</sup> From an architectural point of view, this was a pioneering building made of expensive marble, pieces of which have been found on the site.<sup>24</sup> He also built a wooden amphitheatre in the Campus Martius to facilitate more spectators.<sup>25</sup> His love for construction of new buildings for athletic competitions was admitted even by his enemies. Dio believed that Nero’s haste to murder his mother was inspired by her estates at Baiae on which “he promptly erected magnificent gymnasia that are flourishing still.”<sup>26</sup> Since the emperor was equally fond of Greek arts, he remodelled many theatres not only in Rome but elsewhere as well.<sup>27</sup>

Nero wanted to humanize the Roman games and spectacles, so he introduced the rule that no combat between gladiators should be carried on to the death,<sup>28</sup> for such cruelty was repulsive not only to his own feelings but to the nature of the

---

17. Games in the Greek fashion were founded in honor of Augustus at Naples. These games were held every four years with athletic and equestrian competitions. Augustus, in order to celebrate his victory at Actium, instituted the Actian Games, a fourth year festival, not only in Greece but in Rome as well. But even before Augustus attempts had been made to introduce Greek games at Rome, by Sulla, Pompey, and Caesar.

18. B. H. Warmington, *Nero. Reality and Legend* (New York, 1969), p. 108.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 109. Harris believed that the Roman contempt towards the Greeks and their ways is clearly exposed in the passage of Manilius (*Astronomica* 4.720) in which the author “uses the sun-tan acquired by naked athletes in stadium and palaestra as a reason for including the Greeks among the colored peoples, Syrians, Ethiopians, Indians and Egyptians, who were not highly rated by the Romans.” (see Harold A. Harris *Sports in Greece and Rome* (London, 1972, p. 49)).

20. Cizek, *L’Epoque de Néron*, p. 411.

21. Suetonius *Nero* 22.

22. Dio 61.19; Tacitus *Annals*, 14.21.

23. Martial *Epigrams* 7.34.4.

24. Grant, *Nero*: p. 106.

25. Suetonius *Nero* 12.

26. Dio 62.7

27. See M. Bieber, *A History of Greek and Roman Theatre* (Princeton, N.J., 1961), pp. 182, 186.

28. Suetonius *Nero* 12.

Greek games as well.<sup>29</sup> In this particular case the emperor clearly utilized some appropriate means for attaining his purpose, that is, to introduce Greek games into Rome. He tried very hard to push the Roman society toward an ideal that was very attractive to him, but not interesting at all to the Roman conservatives.

In A.D. 59, Nero instituted some games under the title "Juvenalia" or "Youth Games" which had both Greek and Roman characteristics. The emperor's intention was that all Roman classes should be represented in these games. Indeed, participants from all sections of society gave in their names. Tacitus complained that "never did a more filthy rabble add a worse licentiousness to our long corrupted morals."<sup>30</sup> The conservative Romans believed firmly that the institution of the gymnasium led to pederasty. What really shocked the great historian and his fellow senators was the fact that not only men of senatorial and equestrian rank took part in these games, but even their emperor. There is no doubt that Nero wanted to participate in these games and any effort to prevent him would have been fruitless. His advisors knew this very well and they probably encouraged men of noble descent to enter the competitions, so that their entrance would make their emperor's participation seem less noticeable and dishonorable.<sup>31</sup> Dio, like Tacitus, lamented the participation of senators in these games and said that "Now, more than ever, not only these performers but the rest as well regarded the dead as fortunate."<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the historian remarked with horror:<sup>33</sup>

As a fitting climax to these performances Nero himself made his appearance in the theatre... So there stood this Caesar on the stage wearing the garb of a lyre-player. This emperor uttered the words: "My lords, of your kindness give me ear," and this Augustus sang to the lyre.

Few Roman conservatives could bear with equanimity the public exposure of their emperor on the stage or his participation in chariot races and wrestling matches in the arena. This has been made abundantly clear by Dio:<sup>34</sup>

Yet how could one endure even to hear about, let alone behold, a Roman, a senator, a patrician, a high priest, a Caesar, an emperor, an Augustus, named on the programme among the contestants, training his voice, practising various songs, wearing long hair on his head throwing his toga over his shoulder in the races, walking about with one or two attendants looking askance at his opponents standing in dread of the directors of the games.

Nero had an ardent enthusiasm not only for acting, but for singing and versifying as well. He had a genuine taste for song and poetry as it becomes known from the writers of his biographies. He regarded his singing to be of the greatest importance and like every true artist he was firmly persuaded that his art was a greater thing than the grandeur of government.<sup>35</sup> "Songs," he declared,

---

29. A. Momigliano, "Nero," p. 717.

30. Tacitus *Annals* 14.15. Trans. by A. J. Church and W. J. Brodriff (New York, 1942).

31. Grant, *Nero*: p. 96.

32. Dio 62.19. (Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1914) Trans. by Earnest Cary.

33. *Ibid.*, 62.20.

34. *Ibid.*, 62.9.

35. Arthur Weigall, *Nero: The Singing Emperor of Rome* (New York: London, 1930), p. 256.

“were sacred to Apollo,” and it was in the dress of a singer that the god was seen in Roman and Greek temples.<sup>36</sup> Modern authors believe that Nero’s voice was neither bad nor laughable.<sup>37</sup> We learn from Suetonius<sup>38</sup> and also from Dio<sup>39</sup> that his voice was “exigua et fusca,” that is, a voice which according to Quintilian<sup>40</sup> was the best for pitiful and dramatic performances, something that the emperor loved very much.<sup>41</sup> During the competitions in song, he strictly observed all the rules, never daring to clear his throat or use his arm to wipe the sweat from his brow.<sup>42</sup> He was equally careful not to violate any rules in harp-playing competition, by sitting down when tired or wiping off the perspiration with anything else but the garment that he wore, or letting himself be seen to spit or clear his nostrils.<sup>43</sup> He undertook all exercises required for the strength and development of his voice. The emperor was very particular about maintaining a good diet and refrained from eating food considered harmful to the vocal chords.<sup>44</sup>

Nero also had a genuine interest in poetry. His talent in poetry was both praised and called respectable by modern authors.<sup>45</sup> As for the ancient sources, the picture is not very clear. The trouble comes from the fact that we have two pictures of him as a poet that are very far apart. Opinions have ranged from authentic writing to plagiarism. If Suetonius is to be believed, Nero would write many verses with enthusiasm and without effort.<sup>46</sup> Tacitus on the other hand, accused Nero of plagiarism, something that Suetonius flatly denied.<sup>48</sup> We should not take Tacitus’ charge seriously, for he had no genuine evidence to support it. It is possible that the emperor knew his predecessors and used them effectively. Apparently he adopted and used successfully the devised methods of others. So it is possible that Nero could use his predecessors without copying them. There is a strong tendency among the modern historians to believe that Suetonius’ account is nearest to the truth.<sup>49</sup> We can thus conclude that Nero versified with ease and enthusiasm and that he was a poet of merit.

The emperor was equally fond of horses, horse-races and chariot-races which had been Nero’s most important attraction since childhood; and despite all attempts to the contrary, his chatter about the chariot-races at the Circus could

36. Tacitus *Annals* 14.14.

37. M. P. Charlesworth, “Nero”, p. 69; A. Weigall, *Nero*, pp. 332, 335.

38. Suet. *Nero* 20.

39. Dio 61.20.

40. Quintilian 11.3.171.

41. M.P. Charlesworth. “Nero” p. 69.

42. Suet. *Nero* 20.

43. Tac. *Annals* 16.4 As for Nero’s love for competition in lyre-playing see Suet. *Nero* 21.

44. Suet. *Nero* 20.

45. B. W. Henderson, *The Life*, p. 132; B. Baldwin, *The Roman Emperors* (Montreal, 1980), p. 140; Scullard, *From Gracchi*, p. 318; Arthur Weigall, *The Singing*, p. 219; E. Cizek, *L’Epoque*, pp. 389, 441; H. Bardon. *Les Empereurs et les Lettres Latines d’Auguste à Hadrien* (Paris, 1940), p. 198; Paul Feider, “La Vie Littéraire à Rome sous le règne de Néron,” *Etudes Classiques* 3 (1934): 11; M.F. Gyles, “Nero Qualis Artifex,” *The Classical Journal* 57 (1962): 193-200; H. Bardon, “Les Poésies de Néron,” *Revue des Etudes Latines* 14 (1936): 338; Grant, *Nero*, p. 94.

46. Suet. *Nero* 52.

47. Tac. *Annals* 14.16.

48. Suet. *Nero* 52. Any of the Roman writers could be accused of plagiarism: it was the custom of writers to use both language and plots which were taken from earlier Greek and Latin authors. A good example of this is Vergil’s borrowings from Homer.

49. See n. 45.

not be prevented.<sup>50</sup> Chariot racing, he declared, “was a royal custom, and had been the practice of ancient chiefs; it was celebrated too in the praises of poets and was meant to show honour to the gods.”<sup>51</sup> Tacitus<sup>52</sup> admitted that from early boyhood Nero directed his lively genius in other pursuits, and one of them was to practice the management of horses. Suetonius<sup>53</sup> praised the emperor for his “exceptionally good performance” in the Troy Game at the Circus where he earned loud applause. He had such enthusiasm for the horse-races that he ornamented the celebrated race-horses that had passed their best days with the typical street costume for men and honored them with money for their feed.<sup>54</sup> Dio<sup>55</sup> made the remark that thereupon the charioteers and the horse-breeders, supported by the emperor’s love for the races, treated both the praetors and the consuls with insulting rudeness; and Nero not only failed to prevent them, even verbally, but in fact he encouraged them because he was delighted by their behavior. Dio’s last remark is in sharp contradiction with Nero’s policy over many public abuses which were suppressed by the imposition of severe punishments. One of these abuses, ended by the emperor, was the license which the charioteers had enjoyed for a long time, believing that it was their prerogative to wander down the streets of the city, swindling and robbing the people as though in sport.<sup>56</sup> Nor was this Nero’s only action to stop violence. He issued a decree of banishment against rival actors whose supporters came to blows over their merits causing bloody conflicts.<sup>57</sup> It is rather improbable that Nero encouraged the charioteers and the horse-breeders to insult the praetors and consuls.

Ancient authorities agree about Nero’s love for horses and chariot races. We are informed by Suetonius<sup>58</sup> that he never missed a meeting in the Circus, whatever its importance. We also learn from Dio that he drove a chariot clad in the Greek style and wearing a charioteer’s helmet. “To such lengths,” the historian said with astonishment, “did Nero’s license go that he actually drove chariots in public.”<sup>59</sup> That Nero drove chariots in public or in the Circus is attested by many ancient sources; but it is true that his first appearances were not in public but in the palace gardens.<sup>60</sup> Tacitus’ comments on Nero’s private appearances with his chariot are remarkable?

A space was enclosed in the Vatican valley where he might manage his horses, without the spectacle being public. Soon he actually invited all the people of

---

50. Suet. *Nero* 22.

51. Tac. *Annals* 14.14.

52. *Ibid.*, 13.3.

53. Suet. *Nero* 51. The Troy Game was some sort of cavalry manoeuvre performed by two groups of boys, one younger than the other. See Suet. *Caesar* 39.

54. Dio 61.6.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Suet. *Nero* 16; Tac. *Hist.* 1.89.

57. Tac. *Annals* 13.25, 28; Suet. *Nero* 16. During the reign of Tiberius there had been killed in the streets for the same reason several soldiers as well as a centurion and a tribune. See Tac. *Annals* 1.77; Suet. *Tiberius* 37. Nero’s banishment, however, against the rival actors did not last for long. He recalled them later on and admitted them in his palace. See Tac. *Annals* 14.21.

58. Suet. *Nero* 22.

59. Dio 62.15 (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1914) Trans. by Earnest Cary

60. Suet. *Nero* 22.

61. Tac. *Annals* 14.14. Trans. by A. J. Church and W. J. Brodriff. (New York, 1942).

Rome, who extolled him in their praises, like a mob which craves for amusements and rejoices when a prince draws them the same way. However, the public exposure of his shame acted on him as an incentive instead of sickening him, as men expected.

Tacitus' account of Nero's appearances before going to the Circus clearly indicates that his advisors thought it better that the emperor should drive his chariot in private; but by then he was drunk with athletic and artistic glory. Suetonius' account that Nero had always been possessed by a longing for immortality appears to have essential truth.

When driving his chariot the emperor was hailed as Apollo, and he did whatever possible to look like the god.<sup>62</sup> The coins that he issued in order to celebrate various events, particularly the institution of new festivals, clearly show that after A.D. 64 his coiffure had changed. It was different, certainly not Roman; he resembled the Greek deity whose interests were also in music and chariot-driving. The interpretation of these coin-portraits is that the emperor tried to imitate Apollo, his glorious patron, in the practise of music and chariot-racing.<sup>63</sup>

In A.D. 60, one year after the institution of the "Youth Games," Nero founded at Rome games he called "Neronia," a festival of competition in music, athletics and chariot-racing after the Greek model of the Pythian Games held in honor of Apollo rather than the Olympic Games, for at the latter there was no competition in music.<sup>64</sup> It is probable that Nero got his inspiration for instituting the "Neronia" from the "Augustalia" Games in honor of Augustus at Naples, since those games included competitions in music and athletics.

The introduction of Greek games into Rome was something that shocked the patricians who regarded the whole festival as foreign and degenerate. Their spokesman, Tacitus, has placed the elite's views before us with clarity and consistency:<sup>65</sup>

As it was, the morality of their fathers, which had by degrees been forgotten, was utterly subverted by the introduction of a lax tone, so that all which could suffer or produce corruption was to be seen at Rome, and a degeneracy bred by foreign tastes was infecting the youth who devoted themselves to athletic sports, to idle loungings and low intrigues, with the encouragement of the emperor and Senate, who not only granted license to vice, but even applied a compulsion to drive Roman nobles into disgracing themselves on the stage, under the pretence of being

---

62. Seneca, in one of his essays, tried to ridicule Claudius and praise Nero and his reign which was to be regarded as a golden age for all Romans. Seneca called Nero a new Apollo with his lyre and his chariot. See Seneca *Apolocho cythosis* 4.1: 5.20.32. Seneca's teaching seems to have encouraged and probably developed Nero's love for Greek culture but it hardly explains Nero's passion for chariot-racing and acting on the stage.

63. See Charlesworth, "Nero" p. 71. For Augustus, as well, Apollo was one of the most honored gods in the Roman pantheon.

64. Tac. *Annals* 14.20; Suet. *Nero* 12. According to Harris (*Sports in Greece and Rome*, p. 62) the Neronia at Rome "seems not to have survived its founder." For more on the festival of the Neronia see J. D. P. Bolton. "Was the Neronia a Freak Festival?" *Classical Quarterly* 42 (1948): 82-90.

65. Tac. *Annals* 14.20. Trans. by A. J. Church and W. J. Brodriff (New York, 1942). Distrust towards Greek games had been expressed by other Roman writers as well. See Seneca *De Brevitate Vitae* 12.2; Lucan, *Bellum Civile*, 7.270 said "Nor will the world you hope to win cost you so much bloodshed; you will meet an army enlisted from the training schools of Greece, enfeebled by the practice of the wrestling ground and scarce able to carry the weight of their arms." (Trans. by J. D. Duff. Loeb Classical Library, 1969).

orators and poets. What remained for them but to strip themselves naked, put on the boxing glove, and practice such battles instead of the arms of legitimate warfare?

H. Harris commenting on the above views regarding the introduction of Greek athletics in Rome said:<sup>66</sup>

In this passage we see old-fashioned Romans still nursing the belief, which had appeared from time to time for some centuries in Greek literature, that gymnasia were hotbeds of vice; we see too the fear that the traditional physical education of the Romans—training for war—was threatened by the introduction of Greek methods.

The patrician section of Roman society had shown many times its disposition to look with disfavor on Greek games and their nudity. Greek nudity shocked the Romans who believed that to strip in public was the beginning of evil doing.<sup>67</sup> It has been well suggested that “when the prejudice against nudity disappeared in Rome, so too it appears did a large part of the prejudice against Greek athletics.”<sup>68</sup> Probably such a disposition against Greek athletics had never been more prevalent than at Nero’s time. Greek games had rarely been seen in Rome because old-fashioned Romans believed that the introduction of these kinds of games would threaten the traditional Roman sports which were essential for the preparation of soldiers. They were persuaded that only military exercises were legitimate and that no other kind of exercise should interfere with their training, particularly Greek sports which, they believed, led to effeminacy. Being a good citizen to the Romans meant being an effective soldier. The young citizen’s education and training was directed primarily towards military efficiency. This was one of the Roman principles which long went unchallenged because it was supported by the authority of tradition. Nero, however, believed that military values were not of superior importance to artistic or athletic values; neither were military triumphs to be considered superior to those of athletic and artistic competition.<sup>69</sup> Suetonius complained that the emperor “felt no ambition or hope to extend or enlarge the Roman Empire, and even considered withdrawing his forces from Britain . . .”<sup>70</sup> The Roman historians can hardly be expected to praise this policy “because they were heirs to the aristocratic expansionist tradition.”<sup>71</sup>

Nero not only introduced Greek games into Rome, but in addition he encouraged and probably brought pressure on the Roman nobles to participate. This was an undue assault against the dignity and the prestige of the senators and other members of the Roman upper class, who regarded artists and athletes as dishonored and despised men. The permanent buildings that he erected for these events were a clear message to the traditionalists that Greek athletics and arts

---

66. H. Harris, *Sports in Greece and Rome*, p. 61

67. Ennius *Sc.* 395; Cicero *Tusc. Disp.* 4.33.70.

68. Nigel B. Crowther, “Nudity and Morality: Athletics in Italy,” *Classical Journal* 76 (1980-81): 123. For a complete account of the introduction of athletic nudity in Rome see pp. 119.123.

69. E. Cizek, *L’Epoque* p. 221.

70. Suet. *Nero* 18. Trans. by Robert Graves (Great Britain, 1979)

71. Grant. *Nero*, p. 127.

were there to stay. His own participation in these events horrified the Roman nobles who called their emperor's interest in the games an event "of deep disgrace."<sup>72</sup>

The emperor's passion for Greek games and arts made him neglectful and unapprehensive of the hard feelings he might arouse. He fell under the suspicion that had been aroused in the mind of lovers of the old ways. They were in a very suspicious mood and the emperor knew it. From now on Rome was not a safe place for those who opposed his interests. He was easily frightened and was easily persuaded by his praetorian commander Tigellinus who believed in cruel security measures.<sup>73</sup> There is very little doubt that the conspiracies that followed had something to do with Nero's interests and his competition in the Circus and the theatre. This can be clearly seen in the words of Subrius Flavius who was one of the military officers in the Pisonian conspiracy. The latter knew that his actions against the emperor were not to be taken lightly and said to Nero: "I began to hate you when you became the murderer of your mother and your wife, a charioteer, an actor, and an incendiary."<sup>74</sup>

One probably could imagine that Nero's artistic and athletic pursuits seemed harmless and inoffensive enough and hardly adequate to justify the animosity and suspicion with which the emperor was regarded by the Roman conservative units; but this was not the case. They had standards which their ruler could not meet and regarded his interests as wrong activities by the wrong person. This assumption can be reinforced by the fact that during the Pisonian conspiracy some of the military believed that as soon as Nero was removed, then Piso also must follow and deliver the position to Seneca.<sup>75</sup> Piso was of high character, aristocratic, eloquent, with imperial ambitions, but like Nero he sang and also appeared on the stage in the dress of a tragedian.<sup>76</sup> Tacitus quotes one of the military officers as saying: "that it mattered not as to the disgrace if a harp-player were removed and a tragic actor succeeded him."<sup>77</sup>

Nero became an outcast and deviant in the minds of the patricians but he was the loved one among the people. The Roman Plebs showed no resentment whatsoever toward their emperor's policy of introducing Greek games into Rome. The average Roman took his spectacles seriously enough to resent fiercely any reduction of their numbers, but did not mind the introduction of new ones. The connections between Nero and the Plebs were maintained and the affinity was continued to his death. He did whatever possible to gain the good will and the support of the common people; but this body had no political significance and "counted for more when it was hostile than when it was favorable to an emperor."<sup>78</sup> The Roman masses gave Nero a sense of support and approval for his pursuits, and that was all. So the emperor's success or failure

---

72. Dio 63.1, Tacitus 14.14 called Nero's chariot-racing and singing to the harp "degrading taste."

73. Grant, *Nero*, p. 212 .

74. Tac. *Annals* 15.67. Trans. by A. J. Church and W. J. Brodriff, (New York, 1942).

75. *Ibid.*, 15.65.

76. *Ibid.*

77. Tac. *Annals* 15.65 Trans. by A. J. Church and W. J. Brodriff, (New York, 1942).

78. Warmington, *Nero*, p. 164.

was destined to be his alone. The support of the Plebs and those who frequented the arenas and the Circus was of uncertain status and strength.<sup>79</sup>

To achieve his goals and guard against the aristocratic forces, Nero found allies among the common people whose interests had long been opposed to those of the upper classes. He probably believed that by winning the favor of the Plebs he could control the destiny of the state and pursue his interests. The common people had an enormous influence over their emperor who finally became a lover of their applause. He wanted very much for the Roman people to like him and accept him as their imperial artist and athlete. What was important for Nero was a large audience in the theatre and a large number of spectators at the Circus. The emperor was directly concerned with a large and enthusiastic public; he needed popularity and applause, something that influenced his competitive feeling, offered him encouragement and served as an inspiration.<sup>80</sup>

Nero's love for competition and public appearances may be attributed to an internal disposition which is hard to unravel, and to an external cause which was the presence and the applause of enthusiastic crowds. His case supports the hypothesis that "the presence of other people tends to arouse feelings of competition and also concerns about being evaluated."<sup>81</sup> He knew that his interests were in accordance with the desires of the Plebs and he probably discovered what his people wanted and then came out in favor of it. Nero did whatever he possibly could to please the common people and hurt the traditionalists who were determined to teach him the lesson that the authority of the Roman tradition was uncontestable. The emperor's fear in the last years of his life clearly indicates that he probably realized he had underestimated the power of tradition. The more he was frightened by conspiracies, the more he wanted to approach and associate with the people in the Circus and the theatre. Psychologists agree that the frightened person wants to affiliate in order to minimize his fear; he also wants to affiliate in order to bring into comparison his feelings with those of others to find out if his attitudes and opinions are appropriate.<sup>82</sup>

Nero impressed the common people with his public appearances, and won their favor. It was this support that finally made him indifferent to the reactions of the Roman conservatives and ignorant of the distinction between his imperial position and the efforts of a dedicated athlete and artist. His talent in arts and athletics had been accepted and praised with enthusiasm by the Plebs, a public without high standards of appreciation, not because it was excellent but because their emperor competed in person. It was his public appearances in the theatre and in the arena as a wrestler that made him the darling of the common people.<sup>83</sup>

---

79. One should always remember that the populace of Rome was openly against Nero when ships arrived from Egypt with powder for the wrestlers, not the corn supply (see Suet. Nero 45).

80. Tac. *Annals* 14.14 said that "However, the public exposure of his shame acted on him as an incentive instead of sickening him, as men expected."

81. Jonathan L. Freedman, David O. Sears, 3. Merrill Carlsmith, *Social Psychology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), pp. 499-500.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

83. Z. Yavetz, *Plebs and Princes* (Oxford, 1969), p. 124. Also see Tac. *Annals* 16.4 who said: "And then the city-populace... make the place ring with measured strains of elaborate applause. One would have thought they were rejoicing, and perhaps they did rejoice, in their indifference to the public disgrace." Also see *Annals* 14.14;

The unavoidable question, and one that should not be neglected is: Why did Nero train so hard since he knew that he was going to face the Roman Plebs, whose artistic and athletic standards were not highly developed? Why such a thorough, prolonged and intensive training and practice? There is probably only one answer: Nero was sensitive to competition and to the expectations of his spectators and audiences. It is possible that all this hard work, practice and training were guided by these sensitivities and expectations, and this is to his credit.<sup>84</sup>

In A. D. 67 Nero went to Greece in order to participate in the Greek national festivals. The Olympic Games scheduled for 65 A.D. had been postponed by Nero for two years, an inexcusable act. Even the most skeptical historian must admit that Nero's voyage to Greece presents psychological problems that are not easy to solve.<sup>85</sup> As it appears from the accounts we possess about Nero's tour of Greece, many freed-men accompanied him there. This apparently prompted Roman historians to believe that the entourage was worthy of as much contempt as the emperor himself.<sup>86</sup> However, a careful look at names of the individuals who accompanied Nero will show that tradition is at fault since some very important people were part of this trip.<sup>87</sup> Five thousand knights, better known as Augustiani, a quasi-military body forming a genuine "claque" organized appropriately for the various kinds of applause, went with the emperor. According to Dio, the Augustiani would lead the applause during Nero's performances and the rest were obliged to shout along with them.<sup>88</sup> Some modern writers believe that the Augustiani were the supporters and the propagandists of the new education that Nero wanted to introduce into Rome.<sup>89</sup>

Nero enlarged the sphere of political participation by accepting freedmen who happened to be excellent artists or athletes into his intimacy, thus increasing the influence of various non-aristocratic groups in decision making. The envy and the indignation of the senatorial and equestrian orders at the authority and wealth of this socially despised group was evident.<sup>90</sup> The conservatives were determined to pay any price to maintain their position of social and political exclusiveness. They strongly resented the emperor and his retinue because they found themselves at Rome in no position to make decisions while he was in Greece.<sup>91</sup> When Nero left for Greece he handed over to Helius, an imperial freedman, both Rome and Italy Dio was of the opinion that the Roman empire then was a slave of two masters at once and it was hard to say which of them was the worst.<sup>92</sup> This is not, however, the historian's only complaint.<sup>93</sup>

---

15.33.

84. According to Suetonius (Nero 24) Nero drove at Olympia a ten-horse team and won despite being thrown, replaced in the chariot and unable to finish the race.

85. Momigliano, "Nero". p. 737.

86. Dio 63.8.

87. K. R. Bradley, "Nero's Retinue in Greece, A.D. 66/67," *Illinois Classical Studies* 4 (1979): 153.

88. Dio 62.20. For more on Augustiani see Suet. *Nero* 20; Tac. *Annals* 16.4, 16.5; Dio 61.17.

89. E. Cizek, *L'Epoque*, p. 124.

90. Warmington, *Nero*, p. 120.

91. K. R. Bradley, "Nero's Retinue," p. 157.

92. Dio 62.12.

93. Dio 62.8. (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1914). Trans. by Earnest Gary

But he crossed over into Greece, not at all as Flaminius or Mimmius or as Agrippa and Augustus, his ancestors, had done, but for the purpose of driving chariots, playing the lyre, making proclamations, and acting in tragedies. Rome, it seems was not enough for him, nor Pompey's theatre, nor the great Circus, but he desired also a foreign campaign, in order to become, as he said, a victor in the Grand Tour.

These were indeed Nero's main objectives in Greece. He went there not to win battles for the glory of Rome, as his ancestors had done, but to win victories in the great Games for his own glory.

Nero stayed in Greece for more than a year participating in all the major and minor festivals. He took part in the Actian games at Nicopolis which had been established by Augustus to celebrate his victory at Actium over Mark Anthony. In addition, he entered himself as competitor in many events and won the title "Periodonikes," victor in all four major Games. He loved and practiced wrestling all the time and everywhere in Greece he watched the athletic competitions like the officials of the games.<sup>94</sup> He not only won at competitions in which he took part, but even in those in which he did not. The name of Olympian victor rang as gloriously in his ear as any title of Roman imperial distinction.<sup>95</sup> He gained about 1,800 prizes in various festivals.<sup>96</sup> This excessive number of victories is morbid in nature. It is probable that the judges, due to fear, the emperor's talents, and his liberation of Greece, announced him winner in all contests. Nero was favorably regarded throughout the Greek world for his gift of "freedom." The Greeks, for their part, tried to win over the emperor by offering him an unceasing flow of honors and titles which Nero readily accepted.

It was in Greece that Vespasian, according to Suetonius<sup>97</sup> deeply offended the emperor by either leaving the theatre during Nero's song recitals, or by falling asleep during his performance; in consequence Vespasian not only lost the imperial support but was removed from Court, and fled to a small township where he hid in great fear of his life until finally offered a district with the command of an army. Tacitus on the other hand said that the incident took place in Italy, and Dio<sup>98</sup> told the story that Vespasian had frowned when he saw the emperor behaving in an unseemly fashion. Although we cannot confidently reject the story about Vespasian, at the moment the evidence in favor of it is somewhat questionable and not convincing. Throughout Nero's reign Vespasian was one of his best generals and closest associates. He was the last person that the emperor could destroy or dismiss.

Nero's journey excited the Greeks and made a deep impression on the east but it had been very damaging for his prestige in the west.<sup>100</sup> While still in Greece he

---

94. Suet. *Nero*, 53.

95. B.W. Henderson, *The Life*, pp. 383-384.

96. See R.S. Robinson, *Sources*, p. 164.

97. Suet. *Vaspasian* 4.4.

98. Tac. *Annals* 16.5.

99. Dio 63.22.

100. A. Momigliano, "Nero" p. 737. More on Nero's Eastern policy see: Mathews Sanford, "Nero and the East," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 48 (1937): 75-103; Mason Hammond, "Corbulo and Nero's Eastern Policy," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 45 (1934): 81-104.

had been informed of a possible conspiracy at Rome against him and was advised to immediately return. The emperor and his retinue left Greece and a few days later disembarked at Naples. Faithful to the Greek custom, he ordered part of the city wall to be razed.<sup>101</sup> Later he entered Rome with a chariot, used by Augustus in his triumphs, and wore a Greek mantle spangled with gold stars over a purple robe.<sup>102</sup> These were Nero's last glorious moments before the rising of Vindex and its tragic consequences for the emperor. Vindex' accusations against Nero come as no surprise:<sup>103</sup>

I have seen him. . . in the circle of the theatre, that is, in the orchestra, sometimes holding the lyre and dressed in loose tunic and buskins, and again wearing high-soled shoes and masks. I have often heard him sing, play the herald, and act in tragedies... Will anyone, then, style such a person Caesar and emperor and Augustus? Never. Let no one abuse those sacred titles Therefore rise now at length against him.

Nero the Roman emperor escaped to a Greek world and the price was not light. The Roman aristocracy after prolonged struggle against Nero found the power to judge and punish. They defined his actions as criminal and treated them correspondingly. Nero wanted to introduce Greek culture and Greek ways of life into Rome because he loved Greek games and arts and because he had severe misgivings about the quality of Roman spectacles. In a conservative environment, like Roman society, these kinds of reforms were strongly opposed and Nero had no other choice but to proceed carefully and moderately. But moderation suffered a total eclipse under the emperor's excessive and extreme love and admiration for Greek things in general, and Greek games and arts in particular, something that was bound to be highly destructive of his passions. He attempted to use his power and authority to Hellenize the Roman world; and appealed to the Roman aristocracy to encourage participation, but without success. The latter regarded Greek influence as degenerate and they believed that devotion to artistic and athletic pursuits was a sign of indecency. Athletes and artists had a bad reputation in Rome and Nero thought it was his duty to explain and demonstrate that this was the result of misunderstanding. But in vain. The traditionalists were convinced that shame of some sort was attached to athletes and artists. Even though these men had a low social status and were in disrepute with the upper classes, they had a very close relationship with the emperor. The conservatives strongly resented this because they became a discredited aristocracy that was deprived of power, authority and influence in state affairs. Every affection of the emperor for artists and athletes became an alienation, every sympathy a suspicion.

The only thing that the Roman conservatives were willing to tolerate was that their emperor enjoy games and arts but without competing or affiliating with

---

101. Suet. *Nero* 25.

102. *Ibid.*

103. Dio 63.22. (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1914). Trans. by Earnest Cary. For more on the Revolt of Vindex see: P.A. Brunt, "The Revolt of Vindex and the Fall of Nero," *Latomus* 18 (1959): 531-559.

artists and athletes. Augustus' moderate encouragement of Greek athletics reveals much about the limits of Roman tolerance for Greek ways. Augustus attended Greek games and theatrical contests, honored all professional entertainers, maintained and even increased the privileges enjoyed by athletes,<sup>104</sup> and instituted games on the Greek pattern,<sup>105</sup> but did not participate as a competitor, did not affiliate with artists and athletes and brought no pressure on the senators or other Roman nobles to participate. But Nero became "the keenest patron of Greek athletics,"<sup>106</sup> a competitor in the Circus, the gymnasium and the theatre, thus sharply breaking with tradition. This is an important point. It dramatically and forcefully demonstrates why the Roman traditionalists hated Nero. Traditional ways and values die very slowly and Nero was not aware of that. He was considered an enemy of Roman society, subversive in his intentions, utterly without imperial sense. From the patricians' point of view Nero violated the way of life of the emperor, called into question their traditional values, and betrayed them in a matter of principle. During Nero's reign the Roman aristocracy's prestige and traditions suffered a serious blow, while on the contrary, the dignity of athletes and artists were greatly raised. So under Nero the Roman aristocracy lost a lot, while the athletes and artists gained a lot. It is before this background that the vanity of Nero becomes apparent and his lack of success understandable. He was a rather imperfect agent for the introduction of Greek culture into Rome. Nero failed to note things of which he should have been aware and exercised poor judgment. The Roman conservatives, on the other hand, took the athletic and artistic interests of their emperor very seriously and never compromised or modified their opposition. Both the emperor and the Roman aristocrats lost, but Nero lost more. Nero lost more because the Roman historians tried very hard to make him the most infamous emperor and they succeeded. In consequence the emperor after twenty centuries cannot restore his character to humanity.

---

104. Suet. *Augustus* 45.

105. *Ibid.*, 18.

106. Harris, *Sports in Greece and Rome*, p. 61.