

Assessment 1: 2,500 Critical Commentary (due 29.09.21).

Introduction and Latin Text

The focus of this commentary will be on the historical elements of the chosen piece of text, *Sue.Nero.8*. Whilst following Nero on his journey, as described by Suetonius in *Nero.8.*, the commentary will concentrate on the events, and the actions of the people described in the text. This commentary will also add historical context by discussing events, and people, which are not included in the text but vital to its understanding. This commentary will also compare evidence from other ancient sources, which cover the same events, and attempt to interpret the similarities and differences between them. The Latin text of *Sue.Nero.8*. used is that of the OCT edition of Suetonius.

Septemdecim natus annos, ut de Claudio palam factum est, inter horam sextam septimamque processit ad excubitores, cum ob totius diei diritatem non aliud auspicandi tempus accommodatius uideretur, proque Palati gradibus imperator consalutatus lectica in castra et inde raptim appellatis militibus in curiam delatus est discessitque iam uesperi, ex immensis quibus cumulabatur honoribus tantum patris patriae nomine recusato propter aetatem. *Sue.Nero.8*.

The section of text (*Sue.Nero.8.*) describes Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus' (once, Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus) ascension to the position of Emperor of Rome following the death of Claudius (Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus).

The Death of Claudius

If there was any question of doubt regards to Claudius' position as Emperor it faded when he took Agrippina the Younger as his fourth wife.¹ The blood line to which Agrippina belonged went back to the Emperor Augustus. Agrippina was the daughter of Germanicus and Agrippina the Elder, and sister to Caligula.² This genealogy was not only important to Claudius, but also to Agrippina the Younger's son, Nero. Just as vital, as this lineage, to Nero in particular, was all the experience Agrippina the Younger had collected by being a member of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and her familial connections to the most powerful men in the early Roman Empire. Nero was born 15th December A.D. 37 to Domitius Ahenobarbus and Agrippina the Younger, and at the age of seventeen Nero would become Emperor of Rome.³

It is suggested the exact time of the death of the Emperor Claudius was kept from the people of Rome due to organising his successor,

mors eius celata est, donec circa successorem omnia ordinarentur.⁴

¹ Wiedemann, 1989, p.51.

² Hurley, 2010, online.

³ Wiedemann, 1989, p.40; *Sue.Nero.8*.

⁴ *Sue.Cl.45*.

The poet Juvenal, explicitly states the cause of death of the Emperor Claudius as a mushroom, poisoned by Agrippina,

**vilibus ancipites fungi ponentur amicis,
boletus domino, sed quales Claudius edit
ante illum uxoris, post quem nihil amplius edit.**⁵

The Historian Flavius Josephus, after stating the length of Claudius' reign as Emperor of Rome, offers the potential, or rumour, of the possibility of poisoning at the hand of Agrippina as the cause of Claudius' death,

**Τελευτᾷ δὲ Κλαύδιος Καῖσαρ βασιλεύσας ἔτη δεκατρία καὶ μῆνας ὀκτὼ πρὸς ἡμέραις
εἴκοσι, καὶ λόγος ἦν παρὰ τινων, ὡς ὑπὸ τῆς γθωαικῆς Ἀγριππίνης φαρμάκοις ἀνῆρητο.**⁶

Seneca, in his short satirical take on the deification of Claudius the, *Apocolocyntosis*, plausibly, initially written for the personal amusement of Nero, offers a different version of the event of Claudius' death, that Claudius died whilst watching a comedic play.⁷ Lucius Annaeus Seneca was exiled by Claudius but later recalled, after Claudius' marriage to Agrippina (this recall was undoubtedly the work of Agrippina). Upon his recall Seneca was placed, by Agrippina, in the role of tutor to Nero.⁸ Perhaps, Seneca's version of events is not only to be considered official, but also the truth. However, the cynical, would suggest that Seneca's close relationship to Agrippina, and Nero, would leave Seneca unable to comment, if such a thing did in fact happen, or, go further, and suggest that Seneca was himself part of the plot to kill Claudius.

John Aveline believes that Claudius was not murdered. That Claudius died of natural causes brought on by his extravagant lifestyle, and the climate.⁹ Aveline points to a number of opportunities which arose, before Claudius' death, that opened themselves up to the possibility for those wanting to murder Claudius which were much less risky to support his hypothesis.¹⁰

Tacitus' Account

A chaotic day is described by Suetonius, so chaotic that there had not been time to perform the auspices, until the specified time of, between the sixth and seventh hour. Suetonius implies that had the events not been so chaotic that these rites would have been performed earlier. The chaos of the day is evident in Suetonius' description (as explained above), it is confirmed by Tacitus in his account. When comparing the beginning of *Sue.Nero.8* with that of *Tac.Ann.12.69*, which describe the same events, the evidence is not conflicting, the same events and actions play out. However, in Tacitus' account there is more emphasis, and detail, on the role that the military played on the day, 13th October A.D. 54. Part of the

⁵ Juv.Sat.5.146-148.

⁶ Joe.Ant.20.148.

⁷ Sen.Apoc.4.2.

⁸ Dyson, 1970, p.72.

⁹ Aveline, 2004, pp.453-475.

¹⁰ Aveline, 2004, pp. 453-475.

reason for this chaos is perhaps more evident in Tacitus' description of the same events. Namely, the surprise of some of the Guard that Nero appears before them and not, Claudius' other son (by blood), Tiberius Claudius Caesar Britannicus,

dubitavisse quosdam ferunt, respectantis rogitantisque ubi Britannicus esset ¹¹

However, Wiedemann states, 'the praetorians could not possibly have acclaimed Britannicus as their commander', given that Britannicus had yet to receive the *toga virilis* (as Nero had).¹² It is difficult to understand why Tacitus would imply that Britannicus was a potential possibility, alongside Nero, for the position of Emperor. Tacitus undoubtedly had this information, and knew the protocols.

Burrus

Another difference between Suetonius' account and Tacitus', is that Burrus (Sextus Afranius Burrus) is mentioned specifically by Tacitus, and not by Suetonius. The events which took place on 13th October A.D. 54, were the culmination of years of preparation by Agrippina on behalf of the young Nero, and the promotion of Burrus to Praetorian Prefect by Claudius in A.D. 51, a position which Burrus would retain under Nero (until his (Burrus') death in A.D. 62), was undoubtedly due to the workings of Agrippina behind the scenes.¹³ Agrippina not only encouraged a change in policy when it came to the command of the Guard, but also offered up the man who would be best for this new position as sole leader of the Guard, Burrus,

igitur distrahi cohortis ambitu duorum et, si ab uno regerentur, intentiorem fore disciplinam adseverante uxore, transfertur regimen cohortium ad Burrum Afranium, egregiae militaris famae, gnarum tamen cuius sponte praeficeretur.¹⁴

The importance of the Praetorian Guard should be acknowledged, not only for the protection that it offered the emperor, guarding, and escorting, the emperor wherever he went, but also for the role of some of its members in key events in the history of the Roman Empire.¹⁵ One such event, relevant to this commentary, is the role members of the Guard played in Claudius becoming Emperor of Rome (see *Sue.Cl.10*; *Dio.60.1.1-4*). As Tacitus recounts, Burrus and the Praetorian Guard were also key to Nero becoming Emperor,

Tunc medio diei tertium ante Idus Octobris, foribus palatii repente diductis, comitante Burro Nero egreditur ad cohortem, quae more militiae excubiis adest. ibi monente praefecto faustis vocibus exceptus inditur lecticae.¹⁶

Nero's visit to the Praetorian Camp on the outskirts of the City of Rome, in effect to seek acceptance by the Guard as the new Emperor of Rome was in line with what had become

¹¹ Tac.Ann.12.69; Richardson, 2012, online.

¹² Wiedemann, 1989, p.54.

¹³ Momigliano and Griffin, 2012, online; Wiedemann, 1989, pp.51-52.

¹⁴ Tac.Ann.12.42.

¹⁵ Campbell and Matthews, 2012, online; Millar, 2001, pp.61-66.

¹⁶ Tac.Ann.12.69.

traditionally part of that process, hence the importance of Burrus' position.¹⁷ Which raises the question of why Suetonius chooses to omit Burrus from his own account? One possibility is that Suetonius perceived the positioning of Burrus as part of the corrupt machinations of the Neronian regime, and by naming Burrus specifically would somehow tarnish the important role, and position, of the Praetorian Guard itself. Suetonius held the Guard in high esteem, at least in his own time, it has been suggested that Suetonius' biographies of the Caesars were dedicated to one Gaius Septicius Clarus.¹⁸ Clarus served as Prefect of the Praetorian Guard (the same position held by Burrus) under the Emperor Hadrian, and it is suggested that Clarus, along with Pliny the Younger, was a patron of Suetonius.¹⁹ Or, Burrus' omission is due to personal feelings held by Clarus towards Burrus (and Suetonius not wanting to upset his patron), though given the expanse of time that separates the two men the idea is tenuous, unless there was some longstanding feud between the two families to which Clarus and Burrus belonged. Whatever the reasoning, the omission of Burrus by Suetonius' in his biography of Nero is strange.

Nero's movements

Throughout this journey described by Suetonius, Nero's metaphorical and physical 'level' moves both up and down. At the start of *Nero*.8. Nero is already at a point which is above all those in Rome, not only due to his family's power, but also in his geographical location. Nero is greeted on the steps of the Palace on the Palatine Hill by the members of the Guard on duty at the time.²⁰ The Palatine's historical importance can be traced back to the beginnings of Rome, and Romulus. The Palatine's empirical tradition follows on from Augustus, first Emperor of Rome, after which it became the residence of emperors and the site of the Palace mentioned, as well as a myriad of temples, shrines, gardens and other buildings.²¹ In 64 A.D. a fire raged for days, the Palace would burn, raised to the ground along with a huge part of the city.²² Tacitus tells us that Nero was not present in Rome initially, but did return during the fire aiding those affected by the fire with shelter and grain.²³ However, Tacitus then goes on to tell that the rumour going round was that Nero had organised the setting of the fire himself.²⁴ Suetonius suggests the same, that Nero organised the fire so that he could rebuild Rome to his liking.²⁵ Regardless of what is thought to be fact, when it comes to the life of Nero, this seems like one step too far and, as suggested, was nothing but rumour.²⁶ However, after the fire, Nero would seize the opportunity presented and oversee the rebuilding effort, and the Palatine would become the site of Nero's infamous 'Golden House'.²⁷

¹⁷ Warmington, 1977, p.60.

¹⁸ Bradley, 1998, pp.2-9.

¹⁹ Bradley, 1998, pp.2-9.

²⁰ Warmington, 1977, p.60.

²¹ Millar, 2001, pp.18-24.

²² Bohm, 1986, pp.400-401.

²³ Tac. Ann.15.39.

²⁴ Tac. Ann.15.39.

²⁵ Sue. Nero.38.

²⁶ Sue. Nero.38; Tac. Ann.15.39; Bohm, 1986, pp.400-401.

²⁷ Winter, 1914, pp.163-163.

One possible route taken by Nero on his journey, as described by Suetonius, would be leaving the Palace on the Palatine Hill and either passing the Subura district on his left, or, in fact, passing through part of the Subura district itself. The Subura district is surrounded by the key landmarks and locations of the city of Rome. Travelling by, or through, the Subura district was almost inevitable for any journey when moving around the city from one point to another.²⁸ After passing the Subura district, Nero and his escort would have continued their journey by way of the Vicus Patricius, over the Viminalis Hill, to the Praetorian Camp on the outskirts of the city where the road then becomes the Via Tiburtina.²⁹

The Praetorian Camp was built by Seianus, under orders from the Emperor Tiberius, in A.D. 23. The reasoning behind the building of the Camp, and its change of site from scattered within the city to the edge of the city, was to promote greater discipline through better organisation, which started by housing all members of the Guard under one roof.³⁰

Given the time of day (around midday) of Nero's journey Rome would have been alive and jumping, rumour would have been running through the city of the events unfolding.³¹ People would have seen the Guard escorting the litter through the streets, perhaps even, gathering along the route knowing the custom. One wonders whether, on the journey to the Praetorian Camp, Nero would have remained invisible behind the curtain of the litter in which he travelled, leaving people unsure of who it was travelling inside, and after Nero's acceptance by the Guard, on the way back down into Rome, the curtain would have been opened revealing himself as Rome's new emperor.

Nero's first day as Emperor takes him on journey through the busy streets of Rome up to the city's outskirts to the Praetorian Camp where he is elevated to his position, accepted as, Emperor of Rome. Nero's return journey back down into the city, as presented by Suetonius, is just as much a metaphorical journey as it is a physical one, with Nero's decent back into the guts of Rome expressing the inevitable fall which will ultimately end in Nero's miserable death.

Nero's first act as Emperor of Rome

Orsus hinc a pietatis ostentatione Claudium apparatissimo funere elatum laudavit et consecrauit.³²

Nero's first act as the new Emperor of Rome was presiding over the funeral, and deification, of his adopted father Claudius.³³ The deification of an emperor would have been a decision made by the Senate, however, it would have been proposed by the current emperor (in Claudius' case, Nero).³⁴ Nero's decision in deifying his adopted father (Nero also takes the opportunity to praise Domitius) as his first act meant that Nero had not only become the

²⁸ Malmberg, 2008, pp.39-52.

²⁹ Malmberg, 2008, pp.42-43.

³⁰ Richmond, 1927, p.12; Sue.Tib.37.

³¹ Bradley, 1978, p.63.

³² Sue.Nero.9.

³³ Sue.Nero.9.

³⁴ Burton, 1912, p.84.

new Emperor of Rome, but was now also the son of a god. This dutiful and pious act of deifying his adopted father would also have cemented Nero's lineage (persuading any detractors that his position was just). However, it appears Nero's attitude towards Claudius changed over time. This change in attitude is given away by the circulation of Seneca's, *Apocolocyntosis*, (already discussed above). On weighing the evidence, the act of deifying Claudius would seem to have been nothing other than a politically driven move in the first place, further cementing not only Nero's, but also his family's position.

A Brief Note on the Source Material

Two of the main sources used for this commentary have been Tacitus and Seneca, both of which offer evidence of Nero's reign. Using them together with Suetonius' 'life of' helps create a more detailed picture of this particular moment in time. However, to critique one author's work against the other is a more difficult task given that each has a different method. Each author follows the guidelines of their different disciplines, in this case biography, history, and satire. For example, Tacitus, seemingly, offers a more ordered, chronological timeline of events, whereas, Suetonius arranges his biography in a slightly disjointed fashion, and loosely, by topics, such as Nero's love of music, Nero's religious practice, Nero's foreign policy etc. jumping forwards and backwards in time. When considering style, undoubtedly each of the three authors has his own, nevertheless, their writing betrays their education, and position in society, a position which was extremely close, and personal, to the respective emperors which they were writing under.

Suetonius' 'snap-shot' style of biography concentrates on a particular character at a time, in this case Nero, rather than multiple characters in a particular time. Suetonius, though all the biographies collected together may be an attempt to portray something larger (such as the pitfalls of power), in each individual biography offers enough to allow the reader to make up his own mind on how he judges each particular character.

word count 2581

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