

## THE IMPERIAL CULT DURING THE REIGN OF NERO CLAUDIUS CAESAR (AD 54-68)

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**Abstract.** *Contemptuous towards everything that was moral and attempting to implement to the Roman citizens a new mentality, based on completely abnormal values, Nero managed to use the emperor's cult for purely political purposes. During the 14 years of his reign, he transformed the cult of the divine emperors into a privilege of his absolute power, a proof of the providential nature of the imperial mission. A minute analysis of Nero's behaviour, under the Apollonian protection, allows us to remark that this god was no longer the same as Apollo, Octavianus' protector at Actium, but a god who had suffered obvious Dionysian influences. The dedications discovered in the Roman territory reveal us an emperor with an inconstant nature and completely disinterested in performing the ceremonies in honour of the traditional gods. Thus, we see him associated to the cult of Apollo, Mars, Jupiter or Mithras. The cult of Mithras was brought to Nero's court by the magi who accompanied Tiradates at his coronation, but was abandoned after the emperor's journey in Hellada. In the mystical East, there have been discovered inscriptions in which those honoured were the members of the imperial family: Agrippina, Octavia, Claudia Popa and Diva Claudia Virgo. Also during his reign, the imperial cult witnessed an innovation. While until Nero only Augustus and Claudius received apotheosis after death, Tiberius refused his honouring as god, and Gaius Caligula was damned, the last Julio-Claudian received the title of divus during his lifetime. According to this title, there had been offered regalia. Thus, corona radiata, specific to the emperors worshipped after their death, became a symbol of the living emperor-god.*

**Keywords:** *Apollo, corona radiata, divus, domus aurea, Mars Ultor.*

Lucius Domitius Achenobarbus or Nero, as later known, the last emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, was born at Antium in AD 37. Nero was the descendant of two important families: Domitius Achenobarbus in the paternal line and Claudian family in the maternal line.

Following the adoption in AD 50, Nero gained equal rights with Britannicus, the Claudius' legitimate son, and also the advantage of age, as he was almost four years older than Valeria Messalina's son.

In order to come to the power, Nero should have also met the requirement of dynastical legitimacy. Immediately after Cladius' funerals, the Senate voted the imperial apotheosis and Nero appeared as *divi Claudi filius* but the fact did not have a decisive importance. Moreover Nero neglected his adoptive father's cult, his priests being attested in the provinces of the Roman Empire only beginning with the Flavian dynasty (*CIL* V, 6977; *CIL* VI, 41219; *CIL* IX, 1648; *CIL* V, 7493; *AE* 1946, 210). The legitimacy of Nero's reign came from his marriage to Octavia, Claudius' daughter, from whom he divorced in AD 62 (WEIGAL 1931, 203).

Shortly after he had come to the power and Britannicus was murdered, at the beginning of AD 55, the Alexandria inhabitants bestowed upon Nero the honours they used to pay to a Pharaoh. The Egyptians saw him as "the hope of the world, the good god of the world and the beginning of wealth" (GRENFELL & HUNT 1898, 7.1021). Nero was represented on coins as the "Sun God" or the new *Agatho Daimon*, the new protector of Alexandria (BERGMANN 1998, 18).

In Italy, Nero started being paid divine honours even since Claudius was alive. In the time between the adoption and the takeover of power, he was mentioned at Pompeii in the following inscription: *D(ecimi) Lucretio/ Satri Valentis flaminis Neronis Caesaris Aug(usti) fili(i) perpetui* (*CIL* IV, 1185).

Tacitus noticed in the XIV<sup>th</sup> book of *Annals* the obedient attitude of the Senate towards the new princes. This servility became obvious when Octavia was murdered and the senators ordered ceremonies to thank the gods. This used to happen whenever Nero "ordered exiles and crimes" and "what was considered at that time as announcing a happy event, the security of state, meant for us the sign of a new disaster for the state" (TACITUS, *Annals* 14.64.3).

Nero's ascendance to the throne was accompanied with great expectations and new divine honours were bestowed upon him once again. Even Seneca saw in the young princeps' ascendance "the beginning of a fortunate era" and compared Claudius' son with Apollo, the god with whom Nero was "identical in terms of beauty and artistic talent" (SENECA, *Apokolokyntosis* 4.1-2; CHAMPLIN 2006, 117). The honours bestowed by Senate upon Nero reinforced the divine perception of the princeps. Among these honours, there can be mentioned Nero's natural-size statue that was erected in the temple of *Mars Ultor* (TACITUS, *Annals* 13.8.1: "and his statue, should be set up in the Temple of Mars Ultor, of the same size as that of the God himself"). G. Schumann stated that the emperor, after receiving so much attention from the senators, started being divinized even since he was alive (SCHUMANN 1930, 26). The statue in the temple of Mars gave Nero a similar position to the divinity in the temple.

The importance of worshipping a single person in the imperial family could be noticed after Agrippina Minor's death. Considering her a burden and an obstacle, Nero wanted to drown his mother in the shipwreck he planned together with the prefect of the fleet at Misenum. Nero intended that after her death, Agrippina Minor to be honoured with "temples and altars to her after her death, and adopt all other modes of exhibiting his affection" (TACITUS, *Annals* 14.3). Because she escaped, the princeps had to find another solution, another "accident" to kill his mother.

Normally, the honours should have been bestowed upon the deceased in her quality of a wife and mother of a princeps, to be honoured as *Augusta*, but it was Nero who was bestowed the honours upon as the person who saved the

state from a great danger once again. A golden statue was erected for the goddess Minerva and the bust of Nero was put next to it. To emphasize even more the hate he felt for his mother, her birthday was considered among the ill-fated days (TACITUS, *Annals*, 14.12.2).

Nero reinforced his perception as a god once again. After his wife's death in AD 65, Nero suggested the apotheosis of Sabina Poppaea and her daughter Claudia who died when she was only four months (TACITUS, *Annals* 16.6.1: "Poppaea died at the end of the games because of her husband's accidental outburst of anger that made him kick her belly although she was pregnant"). Thus Nero was perceived by the Romans as a father and husband of deities (BEURLIER 1890, 36; WEIGALL 1931, 227).

The news about Pisonian conspiracy made the Senate decides to bring offerings and thank gods for protecting Nero<sup>1</sup>. Also, the consul Cerealis Anicius suggested that "a temple should be set up at once to the Deified Nero at public expense" (TACITUS, *Annals* 15.74.3). According to Tacitus, Nero refused this because he was afraid of another plot and motivated that "for divine honours are not paid to an Emperor until his career among men has ended" (TACITUS, *Annals* 15.74.3). In the same Senate meeting, April was suggested to be named after the emperor's name, *Neroneus*, and "that of May to Claudius, and that of June to Germanicus" (TACITUS, *Annals* 16.12.3).

Starting with AD 64, Nero was represented on coins with a *corona radiata* on his head, passing this way from the representations of the emperor who received the apotheosis after his death to the princeps considered *divus* since alive (BEURLIER 1890, 49: "*Corona radiata* fut une signe plus manifeste encore de la divinité imperiale. Elle ne figura d'abord que sur la tête des *Divi*. Bientôt les empereurs se l'attribuerent de leur vivant. Néron donna l'exemple et ses successeurs l'imitèrent"). Also, besides these coins there were issued different coins on which *divus Augustus* was represented with the same crown.

After AD 65, Nero tried to reinforce his military prestige. Thus, with the help of Domitius Corbulo, he sorted out the Armenian problem<sup>2</sup> and organized shows in the honour of the king Thiridates who came to Rome in AD 66 to be crowned by Nero (CASSIUS DIO 63.4-6). Thiridates prostrated in front of Nero and called the princeps "master" (CASSIUS DIO 63.2). The speech before crowning showed how unscrupulous the Armenian king was "I have come to thee, my god, to worship thee as I do Mithras" (CASSIUS DIO 63.5; CIZEK 1986, 320).

In order to depict Nero's complete brilliant image we also need to mention the god's house on earth, the *domus aurea*. An inscription found at Rome specified that in the extraordinary house build by Nero, after firing Rome, Eumolpus and his daughter, Claudia Pallas, set up a sanctuary for the Sun and Moon (CIL VI, 3719: *Eumolpus Caesaris (servus) a supellectile domus auriae (!) et Claudia Pallas filia) Soli et Lunae donum posuerunt*). M. Bergman is the one who interpreted this inscription and she showed that the Sun was Nero, and the slave and the freedwoman who had set the sanctuary did it for their master who was Nero, the Sun God (BERGMANN 1998, 194).

In AD 67 Nero made a tour of the Greek cities. There, in order to show his happiness and gratitude to the people fond of his artistic talent he delivered a speech similar to the one delivered by Flamininus in 196 BC.

The text of the inscription from Akraiphia, Beotia (*Appendix*), in which the emperor announced "Greek's liberation" was preserved together with the Epameinondas decree *ho archiereus ton Sebaston dia biou kai Neronos Klaudiou Kaisaros Sebastou* (IG 7, 2713, r. 27-28). According to the decree, the event took place *te pro tessaron kalandon dekembrion*, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November (IG 7, 2713, r. 5-6). The year was not specified, but Epameinondas insisted that the honours had been bestowed in the year when Nero had the tribune's power for the 13th time, AD 66 or 67. (IG 7, 2713, r. 32-33). This uncertainty appeared due to the lack of exact information on *dies imperii*, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October or the beginning of December (LEVY 1991, 191).

Epameinondas was called Nero "the ruler of the whole universe" and "the new Sun shining above the Greeks" (IG 7, 2713, r. 31, r. 34). The same priest mentioned that the gift from Nero, *autokrator megistos* (IG 7, 2713, r. 31-32) also involved the exemption from taxation in addition to the autonomy, *tes autonomias kai eleutherias prostheis te megale kai aprosdoketo dorea kai aneispheorian* (IG 7, 2713, r. 43-44). For all these, never fully accomplished by the former emperors, "the archons, the members of the council and the people decreed the erection of a sanctuary near the statue of Zeus Soter with the inscription of Zeus Eleutherios, the eternal Nero" (IG 7, 2713, r. 48-49). Also, the Greek community was supposed to set the statues of *Nero Zeus Eleutherios* and *Augusta Messalina diva* in the temple of Apollo Ptoos near the statues of the other gods, *Neronos te Dios Eleutheriou kai theas Sebastes Messalines* (IG 7, 2713, r. 51-52). M. Holleaux completed the text of this inscription and in the space occupied by the name of that *thea Sebaste* he suggested Messalina's name, because Poppaea Sabina's name was too long for the space that allowed only a name made of 10-11 characters to be introduced. *Messalines* fitted and she could be Nero's third wife, Statilia Messalina. Despite this completing, there isn't any information on bestowing divine honours upon her during her life (HOLLEAUX 1889, 515). "This decree will be engraved on a star in the temple of Zeus Soter from *agora* and in the temple of Apollo Ptoos" (IG 7, 2713, r. 56-58).

The happiness of Greeks lasted for a very short time. Vespasianus cancelled Nero's decision and things came back to the way they were before the travel of Agrippina Minor's son in the land of Hellada.

<sup>1</sup> Nero's reaction was to eliminate a great number of suspects. Seneca was amongst the ones forced to commit suicide. The praetorian guard was rewarded, and the trustful ones were given *insignia triumphalia* or *insignia consularia* as in the case of Nymphidius Sabinus.

<sup>2</sup> In AD 60, Corbulo was sent to Armenia to keep this territory under the influence of the Romans, crowning Tigranes V as a king. He will be removed from the throne in AD 62, due to the serious problems with the Parths.

An inscription dedicated directly to Nero and *Silvanus* was discovered at Rome. The inscription tells about the sanction of a chapel in which probably there were the busts of the two characters *Neroni Caesari Augusto et sancto Silvan[o] aediculam cum imagin(ibus)* (CIL VI, 927). Also, under a graffiti on a gallic temple at Chateaufort there was discovered an inscription that indicated Nero and *Limetus* as the beneficiaries of this dedication *V(otum) a(nimo) l(ibens) m(erito) / Neron(i) Limet(o)* (AE 1993, 1152). We cannot know if the cult priests were also mentioned on this inscription, because the rest of the text could not be recovered.

Lucius Titinius Glaucus Lucretianus was a priest of the Goddess Rome and Augustus cult in Rome. As indicated by the inscription discovered at Etruria, Lucretianus had a long military career and ruled the colony where he lived (CIL XI, 1331).

The monument was set up after an oath he took when he was the prefect of the governor of the Balearic Isles (*praefectus*) [*pro leg*]ato *insularum Balarum*), finding out the news about the Pisonian conspiracy. The epigraph was dedicated to Poppaea Augusta who had the title of *diva* (*divae Poppaeae Augustae*) and two official cults important for Romans' life were mentioned in the text, the cult of the Capitoline triad: Iuppiter, Iunona and Minerva and the cult of the Goddess Rome associated with that of Augustus (CIL XI, 1331, r.9).

The inscription dates back in AD 66, this is why only the name of Aulus Licinius Nerva was mentioned, while his consular colleague, M. Vestinus Atticus had been executed on Nero's order for his implication in the Pisonian conspiracy.

The gallery of family members who received the apotheosis was opened in this inscription by Sabina Poppaea and completed in the second part with Nero's predecessors, *divus Claudius* and *divus Augustus*.

Even if Poppaea received an apotheosis as a mother of two deified children she didn't have cult statues, and Otho, who came to power after Nero's death, communicated his desire to the senate that statues to be erected for *diva Poppaea* and her cult to be celebrated again. Some people believed that Otho meant to rehabilitate Nero (TACITUS, *Histories* 1.78: "but [Otho] even found time to remember his old amours and passed a measure through the senate restoring Poppaea's statues. He is believed also to have thought of celebrating Nero's memory as a means of attracting public sympathy").

There is no doubt on how negative the ancient literary tradition dedicated to Nero is. Suetonius had an important contribution to depicting the maleficent personality of the emperor, but towards the end of his biography he mentions that many people remembered his reign with sympathy (SUETONIUS, *Nero* 57.1: "Yet there wanted not some, who a long time after decked his Tomb with gay flowers that the Spring and Summer do afford: and who while brought forth his Images clad in robes embroidered with purple garbs before the *Rostra*; otherwhile published his Edicts, as if he had been yet living and would shortly return to the great mischief of his enemies").

Suetonius noted the fact that people wore emperor's images and exhibited them in the *Forum*. The historian could not understand how it was possible for those images to be used as long as Nero suffered *damnatio memoriae* based on the Senate decision. Nevertheless, Otho, one of the four emperors in AD 68, called himself Nero for almost six months (SUETONIUS, *Otho* 7.1: "he [Otho] was by the base common people called Nero, he gave no token at all that he refused it; nay rather, as some have reported, ever in his patents, graunts and missives which he first wrote unto certaine presidents and governours of Provinces, he added unto his style surname of Nero"). During his short reign, the numerous statues of the dead emperor were set up again and he offered 50 million sester to finish the building of the Golden House (SUETONIUS, *Otho* 7.1).

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Despising everything that was moral and trying to implement a new mentality based on values completely out of normality, Nero succeeded in using the emperor's cult for political goals. In his 14 years of reign, he turned the imperial cult into a prerogative of his absolute power showing the providential character of his mission.

Along time Nero was preoccupied with preserving his unique position in the life of the Roman Empire through crimes and exiles, but moreover with the recognition of his special artistic qualities. This recognition meant a new stage in the evolution of the imperial cult. Nero's voice was recognized in the whole Roman Empire as divine, similar to Apollo's voice.

Based on a thorough analysis of Nero's behaviour under Apollo's protection there can be noticed that this god was not the same one with Apollo, Octavianus' protector at Actium, but a god who suffered obvious dionysiac influences.

During his reign, the imperial cult was innovated. If until Nero only Augustus and Claudius received the apotheosis after their death, Tiberius declining his worshipping as a god and Gaius Caligula being damned, the last Julio-Claudian managed to receive the title of *divus* even since he was alive. According to this title he was also offered signs, thus the *corona radiata*, specific to the emperors deified after death and which became a symbol of the living god emperor.

"The Gallery of Monsters" (ETIENNE 1989, 12) of Julio-Claudian origin ended with this emperor whose reign can be considered a copy of his uncle's reign full of atrocities, Caligula. The executions ordered by the emperor, including his mother's, were put into practice in order to secure Nero a long reign, without reasons to worry. All these crimes committed to assure the security of the reign were followed by grandiose shows meant to demonstrate that the danger had been removed. With his death in AD 68 the Julio-Claudian dynasty disappeared from the political life of the Roman Empire.

## Appendix

ILS 8794 = IG VII, 2713 – Akraiphia, Grecia

27. ὁ ἀρχιερεὺς τῶν Σεβαστῶν διὰ βίου καὶ Νέρωνος / Κλαυδίου Καίσαρος Σεβαστοῦ Ἐπαμεινώνδας / Ἐπαμεινώνδου εἶπεν· προβεβουλευμένον ἑαυ- / 30. τῷ εἶναι πρὸς τε τὴν βουλὴν καὶ τὸν δῆμον, / ἐπιδὴ ὁ τοῦ παντὸς κόσμου κύριος Νέρων, αὐτο- / κράτωρ μέγιστος, δημαρχικῆς ἐξουσίας τὸ τρις- / καιδέκατον ἀποδεδειγμένος, πατὴρ πατρίδος, / νέος Ἥλιος ἐπιλάμπας τοῖς Ἑλλήσιν, προειρημέ- / 35. νος εὐεργετεῖν τὴν Ἑλ<λ>άδα, ἀμειβόμενος δέ / καὶ εὐσεβῶν τοὺς θεοὺς ἡμῶν, παριστανομένους / αὐτῷ πάντοτε ἐπὶ προνοίᾳ καὶ σωτηρίᾳ, τὴν ἀπὸ / παντὸς τοῦ αἰῶνος αὐθιγενῇ καὶ αὐτόχθονα ἔλευ- / θερίαν πρότερον ἀφαιρεθεῖσαν τῶν Ἑλλήνων εἰς / 40. καὶ μόνος τῶν ἀπ' αἰῶνος αὐτοκράτωρ μέγιστος / φιλέλλην γενόμενος [[Νέρων]] Ζεὺς Ἐλευθέριος ἔδω- / κεν ἑχαρίσατο ἀποκατέστησεν εἰς τὴν ἀρχαίό- / τητα τῆς αὐτονομίας καὶ ἐλευθερίας, προσθεῖς / τῇ μεγάλῃ καὶ ἀπροσδοκῆτῳ δωρεᾷ καὶ ἀνείσφο- / 45. ρίαν, ἣν οὐδεὶς τῶν πρότερον Σεβαστῶν ὀλοτελῇ / ἔδωκεν. δι' ἃ δὴ πάντα δεδογμένον εἶναι τοῖς τε ἄρ- / χουσι καὶ συνέδροις καὶ τῷ δήμῳ, καθαιερώσαι μεν κα- / τὰ τὸ παρὸν τὸν πρὸς τῷ Διὶ τῷ Σωτῆρι βωμὸν ἐπι- / γράφοντας "Διὶ Ἐλευθερίῳ [[Νέρων]] ἰ εἰς αἰῶνα", καὶ ἀγάλμα- / 50. τα ἐν τῷ ναῷ τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος τοῦ Πτωῖου συνκαθεῖ- / δρύνοντας τοῖς [ἡμῶν] πατρίοις θεοῖς [[Νέρωνος]] Διὸς / Ἐλευθερίου καὶ Θεᾶς Σεβαστῆς [[Μεσσαλίνης]], ἵνα / τούτων οὕτως τελεσθέντων καὶ ἡ ἡμετέρα πόλις / φαίνηται πᾶσαν τειμὴν καὶ εὐσέβειαν ἐκπεπληρω- / 55. κυῖα εἰς τὸν τοῦ κυρίου Σεβαστοῦ [[Νέρωνος οἶκον]]. / εἶναι δε ἐν ἀναγραφῇ τὸ ψήφισμα παρὰ τε τῷ Διὶ τῷ Σω- / τῆρι ἐν τῇ ἀγορᾷ ἐν στήλῃ, καὶ ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος τοῦ Πτωῖου.

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