

Surpassing Augustus: Nero and the Crowning of Tiridates I

In 66 CE, Nero crowned Tiridates I king of Armenia in a lavish ceremony before the Roman people in the Forum Romanum. This ceremony offers an opportunity to examine how post-Augustan emperors used Rome's relationships with Parthia and Armenia to make significant ideological claims. While Augustus' exploitation of Parthian imagery has been treated in detail by Lerouge (2007), Rose (2015), Schneider (1998, 2007), Zanker (2002), and others, how later emperors responded to Augustan precedents has received little systematic treatment. This lack of attention implies that future emperors simply followed Augustus' lead in the East, and that two of Rome's most important foreign relationships remained static for the next two centuries. I argue in this paper that Nero used the crowning ceremony to claim that he had surpassed Augustus' achievements and reworked the balance of power in the East. I show how Nero made these claims using three features of the crowning ceremony: first, Tiridates' dual status as Parthian and Armenian; second that Tiridates came to Rome in person; and, third, that his procession passed by several monuments to Augustus' Parthian successes. I maintain that Nero used these elements of the crowning to encourage the spectators to the ceremony to draw comparisons between himself and the first *princeps*. These comparisons revealed how Nero had not only positioned Rome as the dominant power in its relations with Parthia and Armenia but settled the conflict with them for good.

I will first explain how new geopolitical dynamics in the East permitted Tiridates to be both Parthian and Armenian. Until Nero's reign, these two states, though fundamentally related in terms of the politics of the ancient Near East, were separate countries with native dynasties—the Arsacids in Parthia and the Artaxiads in Armenia. Whenever Rome or Parthia placed its candidate on the Armenian throne, it was careful to show his legitimacy as an Artaxiad. In 55

CE, however, just as Nero came to power, the Parthian king of kings Vologaesus I replaced the previous Armenian monarch with his own brother, Tiridates, establishing a new Armenian wing to the Arsacid house and inextricably tying the two countries together. Following the subsequent war with Rome, it was agreed that the Parthians could choose future Armenian kings, but Rome had the right to crown them. Tiridates thus traveled to Rome as the brother of the Parthian king of kings *and* as the presumptive new Armenian ruler.

I then show how the juxtaposition of Tiridates' physical presence in the ceremony with monuments to Augustus, Gaius, and Lucius' dealings with Parthia demonstrated how much more Nero had achieved with his Eastern foreign policy. Before being crowned, Tiridates completed several acts of physical submission before Nero. Cassius Dio (63.4.3) reports Tiridates performing *proskynesis* before the rostra and declaring himself Nero's slave. Suetonius (*Nero* 13) describes how Tiridates approaches the emperor at the level of his knees (*subeuntem...ad genua*). To reach the rostra, Tiridates' retinue very likely passed by or even underneath Augustus' triple Parthian arch, which showed Parthian soldiers saluting Augustus, just as the Parthian caryatids on the *porticus* of Gaius and Lucius would have also been clearly visible to the gathered crowds. I maintain that Nero and his regime likely planned the route of the ceremony to implicitly contrast these artistic representations of Parthian submission with the public obeisance of Tiridates. What Augustus had only been able to imply through art, Nero had been able to fully achieve. Moreover, that Nero crowned Tiridates himself implied that Armenia was a client kingdom of Rome and no longer a state that could fall under Parthian influence. In his *Res Gestae*, Augustus also claims to have chosen an Armenian monarch, but he sends this candidate to Armenia. Nero crowns Tiridates at Rome, at the center of the empire. With Parthia

subdued and Armenia a client kingdom, Rome now stood in such a dominant position in the East that struggles with the two countries would no longer plague its foreign affairs.

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