

Apt Pupil: The Magian Miseducation of Nero

After a humiliating Roman defeat at the Battle of Rhandeia in 62 CE, Nero's capable general, Corbulo, arranged for the Arsacid king of Armenia to receive his crown at the hands of the emperor at Rome. Of the three ancient accounts of the coronation ceremony in 66 (Pliny *NH* 30.6, Suetonius *Nero* 13, Dio Cassius 63.1-5), Pliny the Elder's is by no means the longest, but it is arguably the most provocative. According to Pliny (*NH* 30.6.17), Tiridates came not so much as the Arsacid king of Armenia as a *magus*, or Zoroastrian priest, who initiated Nero into Magian feasts (Champlin 2005; Beck 2000; Mastrocinque 2017). Pliny reports that ultimately Nero's initiation was of no use, since he did not acquire the magical power he had set out to obtain. Pliny's account of Tiridates' visit barely alludes to the coronation ceremony. Set in a narrative on the history of the *ars magica*, Tiridates' visit has been altered to fit the author's agenda, which is to discredit both the *ars* and the emperor who sought to learn it (Meggitt 2013).

One must therefore be wary both of Pliny's identification of Tiridates as a *magus* and also of his claim that Nero was initiated into Magian feasts. It will instead be argued that Pliny has inverted historiographic tropes involving visits by client kings and members of their dynasties to Rome to Nero's disadvantage (Braund 1984). Pliny builds on the depiction of Nero as the forever-boy prince, who never matured into a capable emperor, and he also plays on traditional Roman fear of Greek intellectualism, extending it to the infiltration of Persian religion into Rome, in order to reverse the roles of emperor and imperial subject. The implication of Pliny's description (*NH* 30.6.16-17) of Magus Tiridates' procession into the city—that he “was leading an Armenian triumph over himself” (*Armeniacum de se triumphum adferens*)—is that Nero learned from the Magi the lessons that would bring an end to his principate and his life.

Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.13) adapted Pliny's image of triumphing over one's self and applied it to Nero's return to Rome after the murder of his mother as a "victor over his own people's servility" (*publici servitii victor*).

Bibliography

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