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# The Consequences of Nero's Ill-Health in AD64

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The purpose of this paper is to propose a new explanation as to why Nero cancelled proposed trips abroad twice in quick succession in early AD64, first a trip to Achaia, then a trip to the East. Tacitus is our main source for these events (*Ann*. 15.33-36), while Suetonius casts some additional light on the circumstances surrounding the cancellation of the trip to the East (*Nero* 19.1). Unfortunately, the surviving fragments of Cassius Dio do not discuss either event. New light will also be shed on the circumstances leading to the prosecution and suicide of Decimus Iunius Silanus Torquatus about the same time as the cancellation of the first trip.

Tacitus opens his account of the year AD64 with the claim that Nero grew more eager by the day to perform in a public venue, and that he had decided to make his first such performance in the theatre at Naples before then crossing over to perform an artistic tour of Achaia (*Ann*. 15.33). He next recounts how Nero performed in the theatre at Naples, and interpreted it as a good sign that the theatre only collapsed after everyone had safely left it. Nero was more determined than ever to cross to Achaia in order to perform there, and now journeyed inland as far as Beneventum, obviously intending to travel by the Appian Way to the port of Brundisium on the eastern coast, although Tacitus does not actually state this (*Ann*. 15.34). At Beneventum, Nero attended a gladiatorial display organized by one of his leading courtiers, Vatinius. At about this time (*Isdem quippe illis diebus*) his second cousin Decimus Iunius Silanus Torquatus (cos. AD53) committed suicide because he had been charged with attempted revolution (*Ann*. 15.35). Sometime during his stay at Beneventum, Nero seems to have decided to postpone his trip to Achaia. He does not seem to have offered any explanation for this to the general public at the time, so that Tacitus can report only that his reasons for so doing were unclear (*causae in incerto fuere*). Nero then returned to Rome, but soon began to plan a trip to the provinces of the East, particularly Egypt. As part of his preparations for his departure, he visited first the Capitol, then the temple of Vesta where he was seized by a fit of trembling (*Ann*. 15.36):

*Illic veneratus deos, cum Vestae quoque templum inisset, repente cunctos per artus tremens, seu numine exterrente, seu facinorum recordatione numquam timore vacuus, deseruit inceptum, cunctas sibi curas amore patriae leviores dictitans.*

There he performed his devotions; but, when he entered the temple of Vesta also, he began to quake in every limb, possibly from terror inspired by the deity, or possibly because the memory of his crimes never left him devoid of fear. He abandoned his project, therefore, with the excuse that all his interests weighed lighter with him than the love of his fatherland.[1]

So the trip to the East never took place.

[1] Text and trans. from J. Jackson, *Tacitus IV*: *Annals 4-6, 9-11*, Loeb Classical Library 312: Cambridge, Mass. 1937, 268-69.

Suetonius does not describe how or why Nero postponed his first proposed trip, but provides a vivid description of the events in the temple of Vesta that resulted in the cancellation of the second trip:

*Peregrinationes duas omnino suscepit, Alexandrinam et Achaicam; sed Alexandrina ipso profectionis die destitit turbatus religione simul ac periculo. Nam cum circumitis templis in aede Vestae resedisset, consurgenti ei primum lacinia obhaesit, dein tanta oborta caligo est, ut dispicere non posset*.

He planned but two foreign tours, to Alexandria and Achaia; and he gave up the former on the very day when he was to have started, disturbed by a threatening portent. For as he was making the round of the temples and had sat down in the shrine of Vesta, first the fringe of his garment caught when he attempted to get up, and then such darkness overspread his eyes that he could see nothing.[2]

In so far Suetonius does not mention the cancellation of the proposed trip to Achaia in AD64, he seems to regard Nero's tour of Achaia during AD66-67 as the fulfilment of this earlier plan. This much seems probable. The fact that Nero did eventually perform an artistic tour of Achaia means that we must take seriously the claim that he had intended such in AD64 previously. It cannot be dismissed simply as anti-Neronian propaganda.

So what do modern commentators make of these cancellations of proposed trips abroad twice in quick succession in early AD64 ? Of more recent commentators, Bradley concludes that Nero had probably planned only one trip, and that much later in the year. He speculates that 'Nero's intention may well have been to journey later to Egypt during the summer of 64 and to winter there before moving to Greece on the return leg. The whole project may have had to be cancelled not because of superstition [i.e. the events in the temple of Vesta], but because of the great fire of 64 and its consequences'.[3] Griffin seems to prefer to retain Tacitus' dating of the two cancellations to early 64, that is, before the outbreak of the great fire on the night of 18/19 July, but agrees that 'it may be that Nero was originally planning to go to Greece and then on to places further east, just as on his actual visit to Greece late in 66 he was intending to visit Alexandria and supervise military expeditions to Ethiopia and the Black Sea'.[4] In the present context, it does not matter whether Nero cancelled the same journey twice, or two different journeys once each. It is the very fact of cancellation which interests us here.

Neither Bradley nor Griffin attempt to investigate the reality or significance of the alleged events in the temple of Vesta.[5] Both seem content to accept the sources at their face value. In contrast, Champlin uses Suetonius' account of events in the temple to argue that Nero was responsible for the great fire in Rome later that year.[6] This argument rests on the parallel between the story of the *pontifex maximus* Lucius Caecilius Metellus' role in the rescue of Rome's most sacred objects from the temple of Vesta as it burned in 241BC and Nero's role in the rescue and restoration of Rome, including the temple of Vesta, in AD64. Just as an omen – two crows flying into his face – prevented Metellus from leaving Rome as he had planned (Val. Max. 1.4.5), so

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[2] Text and trans. from J.C. Rolfe, *Suetonius II*, Loeb Classical Library 38: Cambridge, Mass. 1914, 112-13.

[3] K. R. Bradley, *Suetonius' Life of Nero*: *An Historical Commentary*, Collection Latomus 157, Brussels, 1978, 129.

[4] M.T. Griffin, *Nero*: *The End of a Dynasty*, London, 1984, 161.

[5] Other authors who pass over this subject in almost embarrassed silence include B.H. Warmington, *Nero*: *Reality and Legend*, London, 1969, 116 and M. Grant, *Nero*, London, 1970, who does not describe the cancellation of the trips at all.

[6] E. Champlin, *Nero*, Cambridge, Mass., 2003, 186-91.

another omen – the catching of his clothing in a seat in the temple of Vesta – prevented Nero from leaving Rome as he had planned. Just as Metellus was struck blind for seeing the sacred objects as he carried them from the burning temple (Plin. *NH* 7.141), so Nero was struck blind, temporarily at least, in anticipation of the role he would play in rescuing Rome from the fire. Nero, Champlin argues, feigned the alleged events in the temple of Vesta in order to create these parallels in the apparent hope that they would lead to his recognition as a new Metellus.

This argument is ingenious, but the parallels are not strong enough. For the argument to be truly convincing, Nero ought to have suffered the same omen as Metellus, although one admits that it might have proved difficult to get two crows to perform exactly as required. Again, Nero ought to have feigned blindness, if that is what he did, after rather than before the fire, and as a result of actually viewing the sacred objects rather than simply visiting the temple where they were stored. Another problem with this argument is that it does not respect the fulness of the evidence. It does not explain why, according to Tacitus, Nero began to shake in every limb as he entered the temple of Vesta.

The obvious has been overlooked. It is my argument that Nero suffered two epileptic seizures in quick succession in early AD64, and that it was these that caused him to cancel the two proposed foreign tours.[7] This is most easily proven in the case of the second seizure in the temple of Vesta. In order to appreciate what really happened there, one has to read the evidence of Tacitus and Suetonius in conjunction with one another, in the realization that they complement rather than contradict each other.[8] When one does this, it becomes clear that Nero entered the temple, began shaking as the onset to a seizure, sat down in an effort either to conceal his condition or to prevent the worsening of the seizure, but then fell to the ground and lost consciousness as the seizure developed.[9] His subsequent claim, as recorded by Suetonius, that the edge of his clothing had caught in the chair and that a 'darkness' had descended upon him, represents his attempt to pass the results of his seizure off as an omen of some sort. Fortunately for him, the sacred nature of the location lent itself to such an explanation of his fall.[10] Only a handful of his nearest associates and companions would have been able to prove otherwise. Of course, there may have been an element of self-deception to this claim, a desperate refusal to believe that he could have developed such a severe form of epilepsy, especially if such seizures were only a relatively recent occurrence.

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[7] It remains difficult to diagnose genuine cases of epilepsy, that is, cases where seizures have a physiological rather than a psychological origin, without resort to modern scanning equipment. On the basis of the surviving literary evidence, it is equally possible that Nero may have suffered from what is sometimes called 'Non-Epileptic Attack Disorder', or pschyogenic seizures. See T.R. Browne and G.L. Holmes, *Handbook of Epilepsy*, 2nd ed., Philadelphia, 2000, 130-33. The distinction between the two is not always clear, since a genuine epileptic may sometimes suffer from psychogenic seizures also. I am inclined to prefer to describe Nero as an epileptic only because of his family history

[8] A. Weigall, *Nero, Emperor of Rome*, London, 1930, 217, also seeks a medical explanation for the events in the temple of Vesta, but ignores Tacitus' vital testimony. Hence his conclusion that 'a fit of dizziness, due, no doubt, to indigestion or a touch of the sun, caused him [Nero] a momentary dimness of vision'. B.W. Henderson, *The Life and Principate of the Emperor Nero*, London, 1903, 235, seeks to have things both ways by interpreting the same key term *caligo* both as a real mist and a psychological condition when he concludes that 'a thick mist wrapped him [Nero] round and a vague panic seized him'.

[9] In modern terminology, this seems to have been a 'complex partial seizure' during which Nero suffered a 'drop attack'. See Browne and Holmes (n. 7), 24-5.

[10] Cf. Amm. Marc. 23.1.6.

If the description of the events in the temple of Vesta make it clear that it was the unexpected onset of an epileptic seizure that led Nero to cancel his second proposed trip aboard, then one must also ask whether such an incident may have played some part in his earlier decision to cancel his trip to Achaia. One factor in particular suggests that it did, his prosecution of Decimus Iunius Silanus Torquatus. Decimus was the great-great-grandson of the emperor Augustus himself, a second cousin to Nero, and the obvious candidate for the throne should anything happen to Nero. Decimus' elder brothers had already paid with their lives because of their positions as potential imperial heirs. Nero's mother Agrippina had driven Lucius to suicide at the time of her own wedding to the emperor Claudius in AD49 in order to clear the way for the betrothal of Nero to Claudius' daughter Octavia.[11] The other brother, Marcus, had then been poisoned to death in AD54, allegedly at the behest of Agrippina.[12] So Decimus had been in a very dangerous position throughout Nero's reign, particularly since AD55 when the death of Britannicus, Nero's step-brother, had left him as the obvious heir. But why did Nero leave it to AD64 before he decided to act against him ? If we are to believe Tacitus, the evidence used to prosecute Decimus on a charge of revolution – the fact that he was generous in his benefactions, and that he called the freedmen within his household by the same titles held by freedmen within the imperial household – was flimsy in the extreme, and could doubtless have been used against him at almost any time within the previous nine years of Nero's reign. This suggests that the formal charge was only a pretext. Something else must have occurred to sour Nero against Decimus at this time in particular, and to cause him to treat him as a very real threat. The answer lies in the realization that an epileptic attack could easily have been mistaken for an attempted poisoning. For example, the surviving sources allege that Nero had tried to conceal the fact that he had had Britannicus poisoned in AD55 by claiming that he had suffered a fatal epileptic attack.[13] Even if these sources are mistaken in their belief that Nero had had Britannicus poisoned, the very fact that such a rumour should have started reveals how easily people could confuse the two types of incident. Hence if Nero had suffered an epileptic seizure while at Beneventum in early AD64, he would have immediately begun to suspect that he had been poisoned in fact, particularly if he did not have a history of such seizures. He would then have asked himself who would have dared to do such a thing, and suspicion would inevitably have fallen on the person who seemed to have the most to gain from his death, his second cousin and prospective successor, Decimus. Nero may not have felt that he had enough evidence in the end to bring a convincing charge of attempted poisoning against Decimus, but this did not stop him from instructing his agents to look for some other evidence on which to charge him with attempted revolution, and this was duly discovered, flimsy though it may now seem to us.[14] Fortunately for Nero, perhaps, the realization that the emperor was determined to see him convicted of one serious charge or another, was enough to persuade Decimus to commit suicide.

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[11] Tac. *Ann*. 12.3.2, 4.1, 9,2; Dio 61.31.8. See A.A. Barrett, *Agrippina: Mother of Nero*, London, 1996, 98-103.

[12] Tac. *Ann*. 13.1.1-2; Dio 61.6.4-5; Pliny, *NH* 7.58. See Barrett (n. 11), 153-55.

[13] Tac. *Ann*. 13.15-17; Dio 61.1.2, 7.4; Suet. *Nero* 33.2. Barrett (n. 11), 170-73, argues that Britannicus really did die as a result of an epileptic seizure rather than poisoning. I concur.

[14] Cf. the failure of the senate in AD20 to convict Cn. Calpurnius Piso, the former governor of Syria, on the charge of having poisoned Germanicus Caesar (Tac. *Ann*. 3.14), despite massive popular pressure in favour of the conviction, although it did convict him on a capital charge of attempted revolution. In general, see W. Eck, "Cheating the Public, or: Tacitus Vindicated", *Scripta Cassica Israelica* 21, 2002, 149-64, esp. 156.

It is well known that the Julio-Claudian dynasty had a history of epilepsy. Caesar suffered from it, as did the emperor Caligula, and the emperor Claudius' son Britannicus.[15] It should come as no surprise, therefore, to discover that Nero suffered from it also. The only surprise, perhaps, is that he should not have suffered seizures until early AD64, when he was 26 years of age, or that his medical condition should not have become more widely known had he really suffered from it. On the first point, one notes that Caesar is not supposed to have had any seizures until he was at Cordoba (Plut. *Caes*. 17.2), probably in 49BC, when he was about 51 years of age, so much later than either Caligula or Britannicus. In reality, of course, there is insufficient data to allow an intelligent contrast between the medical conditions of any of these figures. Much depends on the reliability of the ultimate sources for the traditions preserved by our surviving texts. For example, it is not difficult to understand how it might have served the interests of Agrippina and Nero to exaggerate the ill-health of Britannicus and the number and severity of his seizures, or even to invent them altogether. Much depends also on the nature of the seizures. The key point here is that ancient sources tend to record only the more obvious seizures, those that result in violent trembling and collapse, and ignore the less visible which lack such dramatic symptoms, such as 'absence' seizures which are characterized rather by staring and unresponsiveness. The fact that Nero took a seat when he started to tremble in the temple of Vesta suggests that he thought that this would be sufficient to control or conceal his seizure. One is immediately reminded of the notorious incident when Caesar failed to rise from his seat to greet the magistrates and senate, and was forced by the political embarrassment he suffered subsequently to try and excuse his behaviour by admitting that he had failed to do so because of his medical condition, that is, his epilepsy (Plut. *Caes*. 60.6-7). This suggests that he had suffered some form of 'simple partial seizure' at the time and had been afraid of provoking a more violent episode by rising from his seat. Most importantly, the magistrates and senate did not recognize this form of seizure for what it was. Similarly, Caesar managed to conceal the nature of his condition when a seizure of similarly mild form struck him during a speech at the trial of Ligarius in 46BC. Plutarch reports that Caesar had begun to tremble because he was so affected by the words of Cicero speaking in defence of Ligarius (*Cicero* 39.6), and one does not doubt that this was how Caesar tried to explain this incident, nor that the self-serving lawyer delighted to repeat this explanation to all that would listen subsequently. As has long been pointed out, however, this was probably an epileptic seizure.[16]

This comparison between the behaviour of Nero and Caesar suggests that each had a long history of relatively mild seizures which he had managed to conceal from wider public knowledge. The importance of AD64 for Nero is that it seems to have been the first time that he suffered a more violent seizure, twice in quick succession in fact, so that he did not immediately recognize the first of these episodes for what it was and jumped to the conclusion that somebody had tried to poison him. The second episode in the temple of Vesta ought to have revealed to Nero that he had in fact suffered his first violent seizure and that, for whatever reason, and perhaps only temporarily, his condition had taken a turn for the worse. Hence the real reason that he cancelled his proposed tour to the East was that he was afraid that his newly

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[15] On Caesar's epilepsy, see Plut. *Caes*. 17.2, 53.5-6, 60.6-7, *Cicero* 39.6; Suet. *D. Julius* 45.1. On Caligula's epilepsy, see Suet. *Calig*. 50.2. In general, see D.T. Benediktson, "Plutarch on the Epilepsy of Julius Caesar", *The Ancient World 25*, 1994, 159-64; idem, "Caligula's Madness: Madness or Interictal Temporal Lobe Epilepsy", *Classical World* 82, 1989, 370-75.

[16] Benediktson, "Plutarch on the Epilepsy of Julius Caesar", 161.

deteriorated medical condition would result in the dramatic exposure of an illness which he had long managed to conceal from the public. Since he did eventually decide to resume his trip to Achaia in late AD66, we may assume that the intervening period of two years had been without serious incident so that he felt a new confidence in his ability to keep his condition secret. He presumably attributed the apparent restoration in his health to some new measures which he had taken in the meantime, and it is disappointing that we cannot identify these new measures. Part of the reason for this may be that he succeeded in disguising these new measures in the same way that he had succeeded in disguising his earlier efforts to manage his condition. For example, Suetonius reports that, at the beginning of his reign, Nero used to pursue a vigorous course of exercise, use enemas and emetics, and follow a strict diet, all in order to strengthen his voice (*Nero* 20.1). One wonders whether he managed to disguise actions intended to alleviate his epilepsy as more measures for this purpose. If no new medical figure suddenly arrives on the scene in AD64, this may be because he continued to seek the remedies and advice of the same person who had always treated him in this matter previously. One suspects that a hostile tradition may have completely misrepresented the true significance of the alleged poisoner Locusta, and that when Nero rewarded her with country estates immediately after the death of Britannicus, he did so not to reward her for her role in the death of Britannicus, but for her continued role in keeping him from a similar such fate (*Nero* 33.3). As far as Nero was concerned, the apparent death of Britannicus from epilepsy proved that the preventative potions which he himself was taking really did work.

Suetonius concludes his biography of Nero with his customary description of his subject's appearance and health, and claims that he fell ill only three times during his fourteen-year reign (*Nero* 51). Unfortunately, he identifies neither the occasion nor the symptoms of any of these thre bouts of illness. On the basis of Tacitus, and a restored entry in the acts of the Arval Brethren, these illnesses have been dated to AD60 (Tac. *Ann*. 14.22.6), sometime before AD61 (Tac. *Ann*. 14.47.1), and AD66.[17] In fact, there is no guarantee that these are the same three illnesses. Furthermore, as I have tried to indicate, both Caesar and Nero seem to have tried to disguise their seizures by attributing their physical symptoms to some other cause, whatever seemed most plausible at the time. Nero may simply have excelled Caesar in this regard, but one suspects that his condition would eventually have become common knowledge also had he lived as long as Caesar. Certainly, there is one other incident at least which ought to arouse more suspicion than it has in view of his apparent seizure in the temple of Vesta. I refer here to Suetonius' description of Nero's reaction in April AD68 to news of Galba's revolt (Suet. *Nero* 42.1):

*Postquam deinde etiam Galbam et Hispanias descivisse cognovit, conlapsus animoque male facto diu sine voce et prope intermortuus iacuit, …*

Thereafter, having learned that Galba also and the Spanish provinces had revolted, he fainted and lay for a long time insensible, without a word and all but dead.[18]

In this instance, it would seem that Nero managed to pass a seizure off as a normal faint at the receipt of unusually disturbing news.[19]

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[17] Bradley (n. 3), 284.

[18] Text and trans. from Rolfe (n. 2), 164-65.

[19] Traditionally, scholars have focussed on the date on which Nero received this news rather than the nature of his reaction to it. See e.g. Bradley (n. 3), 254-56, who refers only to the 'histrionic reaction of Nero'. Most scholars have accepted the description of this faint at face value e.g. Weigall (n. 8), 283;

In conclusion, Nero cancelled his two proposed trips abroad in early AD64 because of a sudden deterioration of his medical condition so that, in relatively quick succession, he suffered two epileptic episodes of a far more severe nature than any which he had experienced previously. Unfortunately, his first experience of one of these severe seizures at Beneventum led him to believe that someone had tried to poison him, and his suspicion fell on his second cousin and obvious successor Decimus Iunius Silanus Torquatus who committed suicide when it became clear that the emperor was determined to destroy him. This first seizure, although unrecognized as such, only caused a temporary delay in Nero's plans to tour abroad. It was the second seizure, that which struck him while visiting the temple of Vesta in Rome, which persuaded him that he had a serious problem and caused him to postpone any foreign tours for several years more. It probably also increased his dependency on Locusta, better identified as a medicine-woman than a poisoner, which did nothing for the reputation of either.

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Champlin (n. 6), 2. No other source preserves this detail. Dio 63.27.1 only states that Nero became very afraid at the news of Galba's revolt, and does not clarify how this fear revealed itself. Plutarch (*Galba* 5.3) claims that Nero was having his breakfast when Galba's revolt was reported to him, and that his reaction was to overturn his table. This seems to be the same incident reported by Suetonius for a later date when Nero learned of the defection of some other armies (*Nero* 47.1). It is probable that Suet. *Nero* 42.1 and 47.1 are doublets, material derived from two different sources about the one event. I suggest that Nero upturned the table accidentally by collapsing upon it during a seizure. This is supported by his action immediately next. He called Locusta and, according to Suetonius, made her give him some 'poison' which he put in a golden box (*Nero* 47.1). In other words, he called his medical advisor and demanded more medicine. The official excuse was that Nero had fainted upon his table, but hostile rumour soon twisted this accident into a deliberate act of wanton destruction as a result of a temper tantrum, and interpreted the mysterious call to Locusta as a demand for poison in case suicide should become necessary. Suetonius failed to realize that these were two different accounts of the one event, and chose to include both because of their equally colourful nature.