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TWO MISUNDERSTOOD VISUAL PUNS IN PUBLIC PROTESTS AGAINST NERO IN A.D. 68 (SUET. *NERO* 45.2)

By David Woods

Summary: Suetonius records a short list of four different examples of public protest against Nero at Rome during early A.D. 68 (*Nero* 45.2). One allegedly involved the adornment of a statue of Nero with an inscription and a lock of hair (*cirrus*), the other the adornment of his statue with an inscription and a leathern canteen (*ascopa*). It is argued here that the true significance of these two protests has been lost because the key terms used to describe the objects placed on the statues were altered during the transmission of the accounts of these events resulting in the obscuring of the puns that had been central to their understanding.

Introduction

Suetonius opens the section of his biography of the emperor Nero devoted to that emperor's deposition and death (*Nero* 40-50) with a thematic sub-section describing the omens that had allegedly foretold his deposition and death (*Nero* 40.2-3). He then begins his narrative with an account of Nero's reaction to the revolt of Julius Vindex, the governor of Gallia Lugdunensis (*Nero* 40.3-41). He next describes Nero's reaction to the news that Servius Sulpicius Galba, the governor of Hispania Tarraconensis, had also revolted against him (*Nero* 42-44). He concludes this account with a description of the new exactions imposed by Nero upon the inhabitants of Rome as he strove to collect funds to pay for a military expedition against Gaul (*Nero* 44.2). These exactions provoked resentment against him which was increased both by his apparent profiteering at a time of grain shortage and by the arrival of a ship from Alexandria which was full of sand for the court wrestlers rather than grain (*Nero*

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45.1).[1] In a thematic digression, Suetonius next describes how this popular resentment against Nero manifested itself (*Nero* 45.2):

> Quare omnium in se odio incitato nihil contumeliarum defuit quin subiret. Statuae eius a vertice cirrus appositus est cum inscriptione Graeca, nunc demum agona esse et traderet tandem. Alterius collo ascopa deligata simulque titulus, 'ego quod potui, sed tu culleum meruisti'. Ascriptum et columnis, etiam Gallos eum cantando excitasse. Iam noctibus iurgia cum servis plerique simulantes crebro 'vindicem' poscebant.[2]
>
> Thus the hatred of all was aroused against him and there was no insult of which he was not the object. A lock of hair was placed on the head of his statue, with a Greek inscription: 'Now finally there is a contest and you must give in at last.' A leathern canteen was tied to the neck of another and, at the same time, a tablet saying 'I did what I could but you deserve the sack.' People wrote on columns that he had even roused the Gauls with his singing. And at night quite a few pretended to fight with their slaves and called repeatedly for a Defender.[3]

1 The cause of this grain shortage is disputed. In favour of its being caused by the rebellion of Clodius Macer in Africa, see Bradley 1972. In favour of it being caused by Nero's stockpiling of grain to feed his anticipated new recruits, see Morgan 2000.

2 Ed. Kaster 2016: 321-22. The manuscript evidence supports the reading *ascopa*, but this term remains otherwise unknown in a classical author. It is known only from the Vulgate text of Judith 10.5. See *ThLL* II, col. 772. It appears to be a transliteration into Latin, and slight abbreviation, of the Greek term ἀσκοπυτίνη, found in the Septuagint text of Judith 5.10, meaning 'leathern canteen', although many older editions of the *De Vita Caesarum* had preferred to read it as a transliteration, and abbreviation, of ἀσκοπήρα, meaning 'scrip, wallet', following a conjecture of Politianus (1522) and amended it accordingly. Howard 1896: 208-10 argues in favour of correcting *ascopa deligata* to ἀσκός *praeligatus* instead. Chawner 1895 supports the reading *ascopera* if this is understood as 'a receptacle for liquids like the simple ἀσκός'. Elder and Mullen 2019: 243, n. 64, seek to explain *ascopa* as a 'code-switch' between Greek and Latin. This does not work because it is not a direct transliteration of any Greek word into Latin. Furthermore, it does not explain why the only other text from antiquity to preserve this exact form is the Vulgate.

3 Trans. Edwards 2000: 221-22, slightly amended.

Suetonius lists four examples of anonymous popular protest against Nero.[4] In the case of the first, third, and fourth examples within this short catalogue of acts of protest, he is the sole surviving source. In the case of the second example, however, that involving the tying of a leathern canteen (*ascopa*) to a statue of Nero together with an tablet declaring that he had earned the sack, Dio (61.16.1) records that a leather sack (μολγός) was tied to a statue of Nero at Rome shortly after his return there following his murder of his mother Agrippina in A.D. 59.[5] The tying of a sack to a statue in this way seems to allude to the traditional Roman punishment for parricide whereby a criminal was sewn into a sack together with certain animals before being thrown into water to drown.[6] As a result of the similarity of these events, it has sometimes been assumed that Suetonius and Dio describe the same event, that is, that Suetonius, or his source, has misdated the incident described by Dio rather than that a somewhat similar incident occurred again in A.D. 68.[7] However, this is unlikely for two reasons. The first is that Dio does not record the placing of any tablet or inscription upon the statue in addition to the sack itself in A.D. 59. The reason for this, of course, was that there was no need for any additional explanation when the symbolism of the sack spoke volumes by itself. The second is that a key point of the protest in A.D. 68 was that the item placed on the statue was *not* a sack. The accompanying tablet makes this clear when it declares that Nero deserved a sack (*culleus*), emphasizing the fact that, whatever resemblance there was between the item placed on the statue (*ascopa*) and a sack (*culleus*), it

4 Such protests were not peculiar to the reign of Nero but were a regular feature of the political culture of the era. See Zadorojnyi 2011. Suetonius devotes considerable attention to such incidents in his *De Vita Caesarum*. Sometimes, he specifically notes that a statue was inscribed in protest (*Julius* 80.3; *Aug.* 70.2), but he also quotes the verses that were circulated in mockery of the relevant emperor without noting where exactly they first appeared (*Tiberius* 59; *Domitian* 14.2). On his treatment of this topic, see Slater 2014.

5 While Dio's original text does not survive, so that one is forced to rely on the epitome by the 11th-century monk John Xiphilinus for this event, he is clear that it should be dated to Nero's return to Rome following his murder of his mother and there is no reason to doubt this. That is certainly the most plausible date for such a protest.

6 On this punishment, see Kranjc 2021.

7 See e.g. Howard 1896: 208-9; Bradley 1978a: 267; Elder & Mullen 2019: 243, n. 64.

was not actually a sack (*culleus*). Indeed, if the object placed on the statue had been clearly identifiable as a sack, by whatever term, there would have been no need to add the tablet with the inscription to explain the joke. Its meaning would have been clear by itself, as it had been in the protest described by Dio for A.D. 59. Hence the focus of the protest in A.D. 68 was not Nero's killing of his mother, or any form of symbolic parricide either, even if this was also alluded to.[8] This allusion to Nero's parricide is strictly secondary to the main joke. In summary, Dio and Suetonius do not describe the same protest from A.D. 59 that Suetonius has mistakenly displaced to A.D. 68 instead, but two different protests of only superficial similarity.

The purpose of this note is to re-examine the significance both of the placement of a lock of hair (*cirrus*) upon the statue of Nero as described in the first example of public protest above and of the alleged placement of a leathern canteen (*ascopa)* on another statue of him as described in the second example of public protest.[9] The first example is similar to the second example in that both describe the use of a prop in addition to the protestor's main verbal statement. I will argue that the significance of both props has been severely misunderstood by modern commentators, not least because the original terms used to describe these items have been lost during the transmission of the text.

Explaining the Lock of Hair (*Cirrus*)

Most modern commentators treat the lock of hair set on the head of the statue of Nero in the first example as a symbol of some aspect of Nero's own lifestyle. Hence Edwards claims that it 'was presumably a reference to Nero's practice of wearing his hair long', while Rolfe asserts that it was 'doubtless an allusion to the long hair which he wore during his Greek trip'.[10] On much the same basis, it seems, Kierdorf identifies it as a refer-

8 Keegan 2019: 285 suggests that the *ascopa*, translated as 'sack', could symbolize Nero's 'metaphorical destruction of the Roman fatherland'.

9 Keegan 2019: 284 is unique in his claim that the *cirrus* was drawn onto the statue.

10 Rolfe 1914: 169; Edwards 2000: 340.

ence to the long hair that he wore as a lyre-player, while Bradley identifies the lock of hair as a symbol of his philhellenism more generally.[11] Pike even goes so far to suggest that it symbolises his effeminacy, the assumption being that it was a reference to Nero's long hair once more and that the Romans regarded such long hair as effeminate.[12] One objection to all of these interpretations is that Suetonius does not say anything about the length of the lock of hair placed on the statue. Furthermore, they do not take sufficient account of where this lock was placed, at the *vertex* of the statue, suggesting that it was placed on top of the head. To understand the significance of this, one must realize what it means to say that Nero wore his hair long. When Suetonius describes how he wore his hair long during his trip to Greece, he emphasizes how it hung down at the back of his head in what seems to be a reference to shoulder-length hair.[13] So if the protestor had wished to allude to this hairstyle, he should probably have placed the lock of hair at the neck or shoulders of the statue, not on top of the head.[14] This is all the more true if this was an older statue of Nero that did not yet depict him with shoulder-length hair: the extra lock of hair should have been applied where the carved hair of the statue ended as a sort of hair-extension.[15] On the other hand, if this was a more recent statue of Nero, after he had adopted shoulder-length hair, then the 'hair-extension' should not have been necessary.

The temptation to detect a Greek aspect to whatever it is that the lock of hair symbolizes is increased by the fact not only that Nero was only relatively recently returned from a prolonged tour of Greece, but that Suetonius says that the inscription placed on the statue at the same time as the lock of hair was in Greek, a claim reinforced by his use of the noun *agona*, a transliteration into Latin of a Greek term rather than a proper

11 Bradley 1978a: 267; Kierdorf 1992: 225.

12 Pike 1908: 310.

13 Suet. *Nero* 51. In support of shoulder-length hair, see Bradley 1978a: 285.

14 Any sticky substance would have sufficed to stick the hair to the statue: birdlime, fish glue, honey, animal grease.

15 There were four main consecutive portraits of Nero from A.D. 50 to A.D. 64. He began wearing his hair longer in the neck in A.D. 59. See Bergmann 2013: 332-39.

translation of it.[16] Since the Greek noun ἀγών was associated with athletic contests in particular, although it could in fact be used of any situation involving some sort of contest, from a legal dispute to a military battle, it is natural to explore whether the lock of hair was set upon the statue in continuation of some larger sporting metaphor.[17] In fact, competitors in Greek athletic contests were accustomed to tie their long hair in a tuft at the top or back of their heads.[18] Furthermore, Nero was very interested in Greek athletics.[19] Consequently, it has been suggested that the placing of the lock of hair on Nero's statue may have been intended to depict him as a Greek athlete in continuation and reinforcement of the athletic metaphor.[20] This is not impossible, but it is not necessary either. Apart from anything else, this interpretation assumes a length and volume of hair that is unsupported by Suetonius' simple reference to a lock of hair. Furthermore, one is left wondering how the protestor could have made this lock of hair stand up sufficiently to resemble a proper tuft.

It is necessary to rethink the symbolism of the placement of the lock of hair on the statue of Nero, and one may begin this process by emphasising that one needs to pay due attention to the meaning of the act of protest as a whole, the placement of both inscription and lock of hair upon the statue. One strong possibility, based on the alleged timing of this this act of protest and the fact that Suetonius has already devoted considerable space to discussing Nero's alleged preparation to lead a military expedition to Gaul, is that it was intended to refer to Nero's prospective defeat by the rebel forces in Gaul. The only doubt, perhaps, is whether Vindex was still alive when this protest occurred or whether it occurred after his defeat by the army of Verginius Rufus and subsequent suicide. Nevertheless, the Gallic provinces remained loyal to the man to whom Vindex had himself pledged his support as the new emperor, Galba. It would be odd, therefore, if this act of protest was intended to

16 Nero departed for Greece in early August A.D. 66 and returned to Rome in December of the same year. For further discussion, see Bradley 1978b. As to why the protestor apparently wrote in Greek rather than in Latin, that may have been in implicit criticism of Nero's excessive Hellenism. See Elder and Mullen 2019: 243-45.

17 *LSJ*:18-19.

18 In general, see Thuillier 1998.

19 In general, see Leigh 2017.

20 See Rich 1849: 166.

reference Nero's expected defeat in Gaul but did not include some more pointed and explicit reference to the rebellion there, something to place the intended point of reference beyond any doubt whatsoever.

The apparent bland vacuity of this protest contrasts noticeably with the contents of both the third and fourth examples of public protest that do contain specific references to their intended topics, the threat posed to Nero by the rebellion in Gaul. In the case of the third example, as all commentators agree, there is a play upon the term *gallus* which can mean either rooster or an inhabitant of Gaul, so the claim that Nero has roused the roosters with his singing seems at one level to be a criticism of his singing, a claim that he sounds like a rooster, but refers at another level to the fact that his behaviour has roused the Gauls to rebellion, that is, that he has provoked the rebellion by Vindex, the governor of Gallia Lugdunensis, even if he was now dead.[21] Similarly, all commentators also agree that the fourth example contains a play upon the term *vindex* which literally means 'defender', but could also be used as a real name, as it was in the case of the rebel Vindex.[22] Hence while the protestors seemed at one level to be calling for someone to defend them against their troublesome slaves, at another level they were calling upon Vindex to defend them against Nero.

As one considers the problem posed by the placement of the lock of hair on the statue, it is natural to inquire whether it is related in some way to this last problem, the apparent absence of any specific reference either to the rebellion in Gaul or to any other specific issue. However, it is important next to realize that Vindex started this rebellion in an area that had been known as Gallia Comata 'long-haired Gaul' before its conquest by Julius Caesar and its subsequent division into the provinces of Gallia Aquitania, Gallia Lugdunensis, and Gallia Belgica.[23] The relevance of this is that the adjective *comatus* 'long-haired' is formed from the noun *coma* meaning 'hair', whether a full head of hair or a lock of hair.[24] Hence the placement of *coma* 'hair' on Nero's statue may have been intended in

21 See e.g. Rolfe 1914: 169; Warmington 1977: 81; Kierdorf 1992: 225; Edwards 2000: 340.
22 See e.g. Rolfe 1914: 170; Warmington 1977: 82; Kierdorf 1992: 225; Edwards 2000: 340.
23 For *Gallia Comata*, see e.g. Plin. *HN* 4.105; Suet. *Jul.* 22.1; Tac. *Ann.* 11.23.
24 *OLD*[2] 392-93; *ThLL* III col. 1746-52.

allusion to Gallia Comata, the seat of the rebellion started by Vindex, rather than to Nero's hairstyle.[25] However, this interpretation raises the question of why Suetonius does not refer to this hair by means of the term *coma* rather than the term *cirrus*, since his use of *cirrus* rather than *coma* obscures the apparent allusion to Gallia Comata and the rebellion started by Vindex.

The answer to this probably lies in the transmission of this tradition. On the one hand, one could argue that the ultimate source for this incident had failed to understand the significance of the hair and so failed to use the term *coma* as he or she passed it further along the chain of transmission. Yet it seems rather unlikely that anyone who had viewed or heard about this incident at the time could have failed to understand the importance of the term *coma* in this context. On the other hand, the term *coma* may have been lost as the text was transmitted by a subsequent author who had not lived through the relevant time and may not have spotted the pun as he sought to rephrase his source. Of course, if this text had been translated from Latin to Greek and then back again during the course of its transmission, the possibility of the loss of the precise term *coma* would have been considerably increased.

One may now return to the inscription. If one understands the lock of hair placed upon the head of the statue as a symbolic reference to Gallia Comata, then the term *agona* must refer to the state of civil war between the central government under Nero and the rebellious Gallic (and possibly Spanish also) provinces. As for the term *tradere*, this should refer not to Nero's surrender of himself following defeat in some athletic contest, but to his surrender either of himself or of his imperial authority (*imperium*), if not both, following his defeat in this civil war.[26] The inscription is certainly ambiguous, employing a sporting metaphor to describe a civil war situation. It does so partly to make the point that Nero had devoted his life to trivial pursuits such as athletics and will be defeated in

25 It is important to note that this pun would have worked well in Greek also if the reader of the Greek inscription was supposed to continue thinking in Greek as he identified the object placed on the statue. This is because the Latin *coma* is simply a transliteration of the Greek κόμη.

26 Ambiguity is created by the failure to provide an object for *tradere*, leaving it to be assumed. One presumes that this was true of the original Greek also.

a civil war for which he is totally unprepared and quite unsuited. However, the political context and added hair in reference to Gallia Comata serve to clarify that the main focus of this joke is the civil war rather than Nero's sporting prowess. Most importantly, the general public would have been primed to read the statue in this manner by Nero's own behaviour in confusing military and sporting references when he had re-entered Rome in late A.D. 67 following his many sporting and artistic victories in Greece as if he were celebrating some form of military triumph.[27] In referencing Nero's expected defeat in the civil war as a sporting defeat, the author of this protest was also reversing Nero's recent celebration of his sporting victories as military victories.

Explaining the Leathern Canteen (*Ascopa*)

One may now turn to a re-examination of the significance of the *ascopa* within the second example of public protest. As noted above already, this protest has sometimes been treated as a misplaced description of an event that Dio dates to shortly after the murder of Agrippina in A.D. 59, but this is most unlikely. There is no need to doubt that it dates to early A.D. 68, so its meaning can only be properly understood in the context of that time. So, what was the main target of this joke, if not Nero's murder of his mother? What was the significance of the *ascopa*? To answer this, one needs to explain every aspect of this puzzle in full. Since the placing of an inscribed tablet on the statue seems to have been considered necessary to explain the significance of the object placed on the statue, one may start with it. Perhaps the most obvious question here concerns the identity of the *ego* of the inscription and what it means to say that he did what he could. Kaster follows Edwards in assuming that the anonymous protestor is talking in his own voice here, and that when he declares that he has done what he could, he is talking about his adornment of the statue with the *ascopa*, a 'small leathern container' rather than the *culleus* 'sack' which Nero had properly merited.[28] While this is possible, it means

27 Suet. *Nero* 25.1-2; Dio 63.20-21. For analysis of this imitation triumph, see Champlin 2003: 229-34.

28 Edwards 2000: 221; Kaster 2016b: 219.

that the protest is not particularly witty, displaying none of the wordplay that one has come to expect from such examples of public protest, the very wordplay which probably best explains why these few examples of public protest in particular were remembered from among what must have been a far larger number of acts of protest. Furthermore, it seems rather dated in its criticism of Nero's reign or character, perhaps too much so, in that it seems to focus on Nero's murder of his mother in A.D. 59 rather than on some more recent and more topical event. For this reason, it seems to me a potentially more fruitful approach to assume that the anonymous protestor is not speaking in his own voice here, but in the voice of someone else. For there to have been any chance that the public would recognize the identity of this alleged speaker, he must have been a senior political figure who had had some real influence on public affairs for a while at least. Furthermore, the implication of the inscription seems to be that this person had always been loyal to Nero ('I have done what I could'), but that, in the end, even he had had to admit that Nero deserved to be executed.

If the protestor had simply meant to imply that Nero deserved to be executed, without any references to him as a parricide which was old news by A.D. 68, then he or she has gone about this in a rather unusual way by implying that he deserved to be drowned in a sack rather than executed in some more common manner such as being beaten to death with clubs, stabbed with a sword, thrown to wild beasts, hanged, or even burned to death in some way. The suspicion arises that the sack was chosen as the implied method of death to create a suitable contrast to the object with which the statue was adorned, the *ascopa*, rather than vice versa. In turn, this suggests that the *ascopa* possessed some symbolic importance that was probably key to the understanding the true focus of this protest. Given the traditional Roman love of puns, including visual puns, especially on personal names, one obvious suggestion is that the *ascopa* may have symbolised the identity of the person to whom the protestor wished to attribute the accompanying inscription.[29] However, it is

29 On the Roman love of puns upon real names, see McCartney 1919; Corbeill 1996: 85-97. Roman coinage of the late Republican period reveals many visual puns upon the names of the moneyers in particular. See e.g. Crawford 1974, no. 238/2-3 (depicting a jackdaw [*graculus*], punning upon the moneyer's cognomen Gragulus); no. 342/1-2

difficult to understand how a leathern canteen could have symbolized anyone significant during the late reign of Nero.

Since the reading of the term *ascopa* is controversial, it may help at this point to consider this problem more broadly. Rather than asking whether the term *ascopa* puns upon the name of any significant political figure under Nero, it may prove more fruitful to ask whether the name of any such figure resembled the term for any form of object that might plausibly have been compared to a container such as the sack (*culleus*) mentioned in the inscription. As one reviews the possibilities, it is hard not to notice that the *cognomen* of the leading Roman general during the reign of Nero, Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo, bears a striking resemblance to the Latin term *corbis* 'basket' or *corbula* 'little basket'.[30] Corbulo had a long history of loyal service to Nero on the Parthian frontier and was the most highly reputed general of his day.[31] Nevertheless, Nero summoned Corbulo to him with the intention of executing him while he was in Greece in late A.D. 66, and Corbulo committed suicide shortly after his arrival when he realized what Nero's intention was.[32] Hence his death was still a relatively recent event by the spring of A.D. 68 when no-one had yet emerged to overshadow his achievements. Given his recent death, he would have been a strong candidate to whom to attribute such words as the protestor wrote. Furthermore, by his long record of loyal service to the emperor, he had indeed done as much as he could on his behalf, not least because he was now dead and no longer alive to contribute again at a time when Nero needed him more than ever in the face of a looming civil war. Finally, a play between the name Corbulo and the term *corbis*, or *corbula*, would have been genuinely witty, and the claim, in effect, that Nero had deserved a sack rather than a basket would have implied that he had not deserved so able and loyal a general as Corbulo, which was probably the common belief at the time.

(depicting a mask of Pan, punning upon the moneyer's name Pansa), no. 474/1-6 (depicting an adze [*acisculus*], punning upon the moneyer's name Acisculus; no. 526/1-4 (depicting a calf [*vitulus*], punning upon the moneyer's name Vitulus).

30 Juvenal may pun on the similarity between Corbulo and *corbula* when he declares (*Sat*. 3.251): *Corbulo vix ferret tot vasa ingentia*. See Courtney 1980: 188.

31 On his life and career, see Syme 1970.

32 Dio 63.17.

The obvious suitability of Corbulo to serve as the main reference point of some joke contrasting one form of container to another form of container forces one to reconsider Suetonius' apparent use of the term *ascopa*. How reliable is the transmitted text here? Two points need to be borne in mind. The first point is that all of the surviving manuscripts of the *De Vita Caesarum* descend from a single archetype that 'emerged in north-central France, late in the eighth century or very early in the ninth' where the text of this manuscript was 'of undistinguished quality at best, marred by many gross defects'.[33] The second point is that the term *ascopa* only occurs in two surviving literary texts, once each in Suetonius' *De Vita Caesarum* and in the Vulgate translation of the book of Judith (10.5).[34] These points raise the possibility that the reading *ascopa* at *Nero* 45.2 simply represents the best effort of an early medieval monastic scribe, familiar with the language of the Vulgate, at resolving a problematic reading in the text before him.[35] So, is this what happened?

To test this possibility, one must next investigate whether there is any Latin term meaning 'basket' with sufficient resemblance to the term *ascopa* that some corrupt form of it might plausibly have been corrected to read *ascopa* instead. While there is some resemblance between the term *corbis* 'basket', or *corbula* 'little basket', and the term *ascopa*, there is a slightly stronger resemblance between the term *cophinus* and the term *ascopa*, where *cophinus* is a transliteration into Latin of the common Greek noun κόφινος 'basket'.[36] There was also a diminutive form of κόφινος, κοφίνιον 'little basket', although no surviving Latin text seems to preserve a transliteration of this.[37] However, if the reading *deligata* in the same line is correct, and this was not also changed at the same time as the text was mis-corrected to read *ascopa*, one should probably prefer a feminine noun in the manner of *corbula*. Furthermore, this is the best term as far the pun itself is concerned. For these reasons, I tentatively suggest the correction of *ascopa* to read *corbula* instead.

33 Kaster 2016b: 3.
34 *ThLL* II, col. 772.
35 Howard 1896: 208 seems to argue similarly.
36 On *cophinus*, see *ThLL* IV, col. 897.
37 *LSJ* 988.

It is my argument, therefore, that a protestor had placed a *corbula* 'little basket' on the statue of Nero in punning reference to the name of the general Corbulo, and that Suetonius had originally written that *alterius collo corbula deligata simulque titulus* 'a little basket was tied to the neck of another [statue] and, at the same time, a tablet' rather than *alterius collo ascopa deligata simulque titulus* 'a leathern canteen was tied to the neck of another [statue] and, at the same time, a tablet'. However, the term *corbula* seems to have been corrupted during the transmission of the text so that an early monastic scribe, realising from the ending of *deligata* that a feminine noun was required and from the substance of the text that this noun had to describe a container of some sort vaguely comparable to a *culleus*, corrected the text to read *ascopa*, a noun familiar to him from the reading of the Vulgate, without realising that this term would have been unknown to Suetonius and other authors of the same period.

Conclusion

I have argued that the text of Suetonius as it has come down to us cannot be trusted in its descriptions of two of the four examples of public protest that appear to have been carried out against Nero at Rome in early A.D. 68. In each case, it is arguable that the text uses terms that obscure the puns that were central to the full understanding of these acts of protest at the time of their performance. In the first case, it makes more sense to describe what a protestor placed on a statue of Nero as *coma* 'hair' rather than *cirrus* 'lock of hair', because that clarifies that the joke refers to what is happening in *Gallia Comata* 'Long-haired Gaul'. In the second case, it makes more sense to describe what a protestor placed on a statue of Nero as a *corbula* 'little basket' rather than an *ascopa* 'leathern canteen', because that clarifies that the joke refers to Nero's shameful treatment of his loyal general Corbulo. It seems unlikely that Suetonius would have failed to perceive these puns had they been present in his immediate source. In the first case, therefore, the fault presumably lies with the author of his immediate source or someone before him. In the second case, however, the nature of the error suggests that the fault lies with the mistaken correction of the text by an early monastic scribe.

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