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Title	Curing Nero: A cold drink in context
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Publication date	2009-12-01
Original Citation	Woods, D; (2009) 'Curing Nero: A Cold Drink in Context'. Classics Ireland, 16 :40-48.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	http://www.classicsireland.com/
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Download date	2026-10-10 17:02:14
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/727

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CURING NERO:
A COLD DRINK IN CONTEXT

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In his discussion of water-quality, Pliny the Elder describes how it was the emperor Nero who first discovered how to use snow to produce a pleasant drink of cold water so that one did not have to drink the snow itself also (*NH* 31.40):

> *Neronis principis inventum est decoquere aquam vitroque demissam in nives refrigerare. Ita voluptas frigoris contingit sine vitiis nivis*.[1]
>
> 'It was a discovery of the emperor Nero to boil water and cool it in a glass vessel by thrusting it into snow. In this way is obtained a pleasant coolness without the injurious qualities of snow'.

Unfortunately, Pliny does not say when Nero made this

[1] Ed. and trans. Jones (1963) 400-02. In fact, snow had long been used by both Greeks and Romans to cool both wine and water without contaminating the drink itself. See Geer (1935) 62 who argues that what was new in Nero's method was the use of boiled water, 'since the method of cooling is identical with that employed by the later types of Greek ψυκτήρ'. Goddard (1994) 72 argues that Nero's discovery was regarded subsequently as an example of negligence, that 'it represents a waste of time, an elaborate process destined to achieve nothing, beginning with plain water and ending with plain water'. This misunderstands the point of the process which was not just taste, but temperature also, and as Pliny explains next, it was believed that water that had been heated could be cooled to a greater degree.

discovery, or why he had been experimenting in this way. Nor does any other source for his reign.[2] Given the emphasis here on pleasure (*voluptas*) and Nero's general reputation, both ancient and modern, as a man who devoted himself to various types of physical pleasure, one is tempted to assume that he had merely been searching for a new and unusual way to quench his thirst. In so far as Pliny rails elsewhere both against the storage of snow by the wealthy for drinking out of season, and against the boiling of water before then chilling it, as if these were purely matters of luxury, it seems probable that he regarded Nero's discovery as just another exotic pleasure.[3] The idea that Nero should have used snow to cool his drink, snow that had apparently been stored or transported at great expense for this purpose, certainly conforms to the ancient depiction of Nero as a man whose excess or extravagance (*luxuria*) knew no bounds.[4] Hence modern commentators seem generally to agree in interpreting Nero's discovery of this new form of cold drink as another sign of his

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[2] Suet. *Nero* 48 and Dio 63.28.5 preserve similar accounts telling how Nero scooped up some water in his hand from a pool near the villa in which he was attempting to hide on the day of his suicide and described it ironically as his special drink, the *decocta Neronis*. The significance of the allusion would be lost to us without Pliny's account of his invention of a new method of producing a cold drink of water. However, it is important to note that the story itself is probably fictitious, as are many of the details in the larger account to which it belongs. See Sansone (1993), esp. 182-83. While Warmington (1977) 115 and Bradley (1978) 277 explain the allusion in Suetonius' text, neither speculates as to the circumstances surrounding the original invention of the *decocta Neronis*.

[3] Plin. *NH* 19.55.

[4] In general on Nero's *luxuria*, see Kragelund (2000). Seneca (*Q. Nat*. 4.13) condemns the luxury trade in snow for use in cold drinks designed to soothe stomaches disturbed by gluttony, but does not necessarily hit at Nero because Nero did not actually drink the snow.

excess.[5] Yet it is important to remember that it was commonly accepted at this time that cold drinks could serve serious medical purposes as well be pleasurable in themselves. Most famously, for example, the doctor Antonius Musa restored the emperor Augustus to health in Spain in 23BC by prescribing a regime of cold baths and cold drinks,[6] It is worth investigating, therefore, whether Nero was ever seriously ill during his reign and how his doctors treated this illness.

Suetonius reports that Nero suffered only three illnesses during his fourteen years of rule, but that none of them was serious enough to stop him from drinking wine or to cause him to break any other habit.[7] Unfortunately, he does not discuss any of these illnesses in any more detail. In contrast, Tacitus preserves some important details concerning the circumstances and origin of one serious bout of illness during AD60 (*Ann*. 14.22):

> *Isdem diebus nimia luxus cupido infamiam et periculum Neroni tulit, quia fontem aquae a Q. Marcio ad urbem deductae nando incesserat; videbaturque potus sacros et caerimoniam loci corpore loto polluisse. Secutaque anceps valetudo iram deum*

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[5] E.g. Grant (1970) 156, describes Nero's new drink as 'his own contribution to the pleasures of the table'; Champlin (2003) 50, refers to Nero's 'luxurious habit of boiling water and then cooling the glass in snow'; Malitz (2005) 107, refers, incorrectly, to the 'luxurious beverage made of snow'.

[6] Dio 53.30.3: καὶ ψυχρολουσίαις καὶ ψυχροποσίαις ἀνέσωσε. Suetonius (*Aug*. 81) refers simply to the application of cold poultices, while Pliny (*NH* 19.28) describes his prescription of lettuce also, regarded as a cooling foodstuff. On the career of Musa, see Michler (1993). In general on bathing (whether hot or cold) and medicine, see Fagan (1999) 85-103.

[7] Suet. *Nero* 51. The evidence suggests that Nero may also have had epilepsy, suffering from seizures in AD64 and AD68 at least, although the ancient sources do not seem to have recognised these seizures as such. See Woods (2004).

adfirmavit.[8]

> 'About the same date, Nero's passion for extravagance brought him some disrepute and danger: he had entered and swum in the sources of the stream which Quintus Marcius conveyed to Rome; and it was considered that by bathing there he had profaned the sacred waters and holiness of the site. The divine anger was confirmed by a grave illness which followed'.

Tacitus characterizes Nero's desire to bathe in the spring feeding the Aqua Marcia aqueduct as just another symptom of his excess, and modern commentators seem generally inclined to accept this judgement.[9] However, the fact that Nero should have apparently been struck by a serious illness immediately afterwards raises the possibility that the hostile tradition which Tacitus preserves has misinterpreted his intentions in bathing there, deliberately or otherwise. To be specific, this association suggests that, as Schiller noted long ago, Nero may have sought to bathe in the spring precisely because he was already ill.[10] However, far from curing his illness, this may have made it worse, so that what may have seemed to be a mild illness initially, unknown beyond the emperor's immediate entourage, gained wider public knowledge as it deteriorated into a longer, life-threatening illness.[11] This raises

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[8] Ed. Furneaux (1891) 418.

[9] E.g. Woodcock (1939) 112; Barrett in Yardley (2008) 486. The spring lay near the 38th milestone from Rome. On this aqueduct, see Richardson (1992) 17-18.

[10] Schiller (1872) 139, n. 2. Furneaux (1891) 418, n. 4, does at least mention this potential medical explanation.

[11] This is not to deny that someone could fall ill shortly after bathing. Most famously, Alexander the Great became seriously ill in 333BC after bathing in the river Cydnus in order to wash the dust and sweat off himself (Curt. 3.5; Arr. *Anab*. 2.4; Plut. *Alex*. 19). One possibility is that he contacted malaria. However, the very existence of such an example may have encouraged a false assumption that

the question as to why Nero should have sought to bathe in the source of the Aqua Marcia in particular. The answer is that this spring was regarded as providing the best water in the vicinity of Rome, that is, the coldest and most wholesome. As Pliny reports (*NH* 31.41):

> *Clarissima aquarum omnium in toto orbe frigoris salubritatisque palma praeconio urbis Marcia est inter reliqua deum munera urbi tributa*.[12]
>
> 'The first prize for the coolest and most wholesome water in the whole world has been awarded by the voice of Rome to the Aqua Marcia, one of the gods' gifts to our city'.

If temperature was all that mattered, then Nero might well have preferred a bath cooled with snow, as he was apparently accustomed to take during the summer if one can believe Suetonius.[13] However, if the purity or wholesomeness of the water was also important, then it would have made best sense to proceed directly to the source of the most wholesome water. It is my suggestion, therefore, that Nero bathed in the source of the Aqua Marcia aqueduct for strictly medicinal reasons, because as the source of the coldest and most wholesome water in the vicinity of Rome, it was thought to provide the waters best suited to cure his illness, and, of course, nothing but the best was good enough for the emperor himself.

If Nero bathed in the cold waters of the source of the Aqua

Nero had become sick after bathing in the spring rather than that he had already been sick beforehand, not least when one tradition apparently believed that Nero had seen himself as a new Alexander. On his alleged creation of a 'phalanx of Alexander the Great' (Suet. *Nero* 19.2), see Woods (2006) 148-50.

[12] Ed. and trans. Jones (1963) 402.

[13] Suet. *Nero* 27.2.

Marcia in order to cure an illness, then this may well have been the occasion of his invention of his drink cooled by, but not containing, snow also. A common factor in each case, the determination to avoid contact with snow, whether externally by bathing in water chilled by the addition of snow or internally by drinking water chilled similarly, suggests that these events may be much more closely connected than has been realized. However, there were many strongly conflicting medical theories during the early imperial period, and the fact that Antonius Musa's prescription of cold baths and drinks had not worked for Augustus' son-in-law and nephew Marcellus shortly after his own cure seems to have prevented his new cold remedies from replacing the more traditional hot remedies.[14] So why would Nero have returned to these cold remedies ? Two points deserve to be noted here. The first is that Nero's reign witnessed the sudden rise of Charmis of Massilia whose championing of cold remedies once more won rapid support among the aristocracy at Rome, as Pliny dramatically reveals (*NH* 29.10):[15]

> *Hi regebant fata, cum repente civitatem Charmis ex eadem Massilia invasit damnatis non solum prioribus medicis, verum et balneis, frigidaque etiam hibernis algoribus lavari persuasit. Mersit aegros in lacus. Videbamus senes consulares usque in ostentationem rigentes, qua de re exstat etiam Annaei Senecae adstipulatio*.[16]
>
> 'These men were ruling our destinies when suddenly the state was invaded by Charmis, also from Massilia, who condemned not only previous physicians but also hot baths, persuading people to bathe in cold water even during the winter frosts. His patients he plunged into tanks, and we used to see old men,

[14] Dio 53.30.4.
[15] On Charmis, see *RE* 3, col. 2175.
[16] Ed. Jones (1963) 188.

> consulars, actually stiff with cold in order to show off. Of this we have today a confirmation even in the writings of Annaeus Seneca'.

The second, as alluded to in this very passage, is that Nero's former tutor and current advisor in AD60, Seneca, was himself a devotee of cold baths.[17] In this context, therefore, it is not unlikely that one of Nero's doctors should have prescribed cold remedies,[18] and that Seneca at least should have supported his advice.

In conclusion, the sudden rise in popularity of cold remedies, including cold baths, during the reign of Nero once more may well have provided the context in which a sick Nero decided to bathe in the source of the Aqua Marcia, as Schiller originally suggested. However, this would also have been the perfect occasion for Nero to have begun to experiment in order to create a new cold drink also, and his determination to avoid direct contact with snow in each case suggests a link. He may even have continued to take this drink after his illness, as a health-drink. Hence neither his decision to bathe in the source of the Aqua Marcia nor his invention of his cold drink was necessarily a sign of Nero's *cupido luxus*, despite what a hostile tradition claims in each case.

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[17] Sen. *Epp*. 53.3; 83.5.

[18] A certain Andromachus served as one of his doctors sometime after his 'liberation' of Greece in about November AD66, but nothing is known about the earlier period. In general, see Muller (1998).

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