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NERO'S PROSOPOGRAPHY: A VIEW OF THE ANCIENT THEORISTS

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Emperor Nero is perhaps, the most intriguing of the Julio-Claudians. This is made more so, because in many ways, his personality has been difficult to interpret. According to Garzetti (1973)ⁱ, his figure 'could become unreal or completely unintelligible if one fails to articulate his particular concept of princeps power and his policy of exploiting despotism through pseudo-cultural intellectualism.

In agreement with Garzetti therefore, a meaningful prosopography delineation. of Nero, must begin with a consideration of what Ogilvie (1970:23) meant when he says in *The Romans and their gods*;

The psychology of the Romans was based on the assumption that a man's character is something fixed, something given to him at birth. Nothing could ever alter that character or the actions that flowed from it.

Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, who was adopted heir to the throne by ~ emperor Claudius, with the name Nero, was the only surviving male descendant from Germanicus. His probable date of birth has been put at December 15, in the year 37. Nero had lost his father, Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus, at the early age of three. He suffered some dislocations during the reign of Gaius when his inheritance was confiscated and his mother Agrippina was banished; he was forced to stay with an aunt, Domitia Lepida. His fortunes however brightened during Claudius' time when things were normalised and he inherited another estate from his step father — Passiehus Crispus. From whichever angle one chooses to look at him, Emperor Nero

was one of the most charismatic of the Julio-Claudians. His particular kind of despotism was guided by his Super-human concept of *auctoritas*, manifested in his literary-cultural and spiritual penchants. From the wide-ranging investigative work Carried out over the years by scholars including evidence from both epigraphy and papyrology, his character has been reconstructed; in addition, literary traditions, along with reports contained in the works of historians like Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio, some of which were sometimes hostile or favourable have also been of immense help. What manner of man, therefore was Nero? Questions such as this have been the pre-occupation of Neronian scholars over the years. In spite of available sources, as earlier hinted, investigations continue in attempt to unearth the real Nero.

Views from the Ancient Theorists

Syme (1958)ⁱⁱ also seems to confirm it was the way of thought of the ancients to conceive a man's inner nature as something definable and immutable. Incidentally, these two views appear at variance with those of ancient philosophers on the development of character. The Stoics especially, believe that 'nature' — that is, the innate element as a major factor, either as temperament or some sort of genius i.e. (potential excellence), blends with such factors as upbringing-, habit-and habit-forming training. These are further subject to the influence of parents, teachers and society in general. So, in the formation of character, an individual is seen as an active participant—an independent force. On attaining adulthood, (a process associated in ancient philosophy, with the development of rational thought pattern), the person becomes, in principle capable of playing a major role in his own character-formation through reasoned reflection and decision. After this stage, as ancient theorists believe, whether the individual becomes a good or bad person, is to a considerable extent up to him.

According to Guthrie, (1969), the transition from childhood to adulthood is viewed as a critical stage in character formation, and one which often determines the qualities exhibited in later life by the individual. But then, most of these schools tend to place emphasis on the need for continued self-criticism, through adult life, and the possibility and value of doing away with ingrained defects and inclinations by deliberate and sustained efforts. The self-help aspect of ancient philosophy became pervasive in the works of writers of the late Republic and early principate. Such works as Seneca's

Epistulae Morales and De Ira; Cicero's, Tusculans, likewise had this pre-occupation as its dominant theme. Horace's Satires' and Epistles, were also replete with such themes.

Sadly, however, there appears an uncoordinated approach to the views expressed by ancient theorists on character formation. This is not surprising, since philosophy, especially "moral" philosophy during this period was not as specialized as it is today. Rather it merely formed part of the intellectual discourse of many of these writers. For instance, Tacitus in (Ann. V. 122) even though not a philosopher, echoes a few lines on Stoic and Epicurean moral theory on fate and free-will:

Sed mini haec ac talia audienti in incerto sudicium est fatone
res mortalium et necessitate immutabili an forte volvantur.
Quippe pentissimos veterum quique sectum eorum
aemulantur diversos reperiesⁱⁱⁱ.

I hear this and similar stories. It feels uncertain whether human affairs are directed by fate's unalterable necessity or by chance. On this question the ancient thinkers and their disciples differ.^{iv}

Thus it was not unusual to observe such overlapping of views on character formation in the writings of the period. How then did the ancient theorists make use of the character viewpoint in determining the behavior of emperors, particularly Nero's. In other words, to what extent, as reflected in the Annals of Tacitus, including other historians such as Livy and Sallust, can the prosopography of Nero be judged by the parameters of ancient theorists?

Gill (1983) regards the salient features of the character-viewpoint, as morally evaluative, that is, as the possessor of good or bad qualities that merit praise or blame. The individual is judged or assessed in this viewpoint by reference to a determinate standard of excellence, such as; virtue or good character-civlis animus. In essence, he is regarded, as is usual these days, as a moral agent responsible under normal circumstances for his actions and having sole responsibility for his "dispositions or character-traits". But Dowdell (1978) distinguished between temperamental qualities which are a product of the innate psychophysical constitution and developed ethical character-traits. According to him, it is also part of the character-viewpoint to make a distinction between "temperaments" - (what nature makes of man) e.g. (melancholy) and 'character' (what man makes of himself).

Most ancient historians, including Tacitus, Sallust and Livy usually present their works as evaluative of great men of the past. It was basically that of passing moral judgement on their activities, and by so doing provided their readers examples to either imitate or avoid.

Tacitus in (Ann. III.65) tells us:

... quod praecipuum munus analium reor, ne virtutes silleantur, utque pravis dictis factisque ex posteritate et infamia metus sit'.

it seems to me a historian's foremost duty to ensure that merit is part "corded, and to confront their crooked deeds and words with the fear and posterity's denunciations"^{vi}

In essence, therefore, the historian is stating the usefulness of examining the character of emperors and other great men of old. These writers were not interested in personalities per se, as individuals or were they bothered with painting sympathetic pictures of them. Their aim was neither to indulge in psychological evaluation as most modern biographers would do, rather, they were interested in passing judgment, based on certain preconceived parameters of excellence to see whether they measure up or not.

It is difficult, however, to insist, as in the views of Ogilvie and Syme, including those of most ancient philosophical schools, on the immutability of character, as this would be inconsistent with the psychology of the Romans, on childhood upbringing, which according to available records is subject to environmental influence. There is a sense in which, it can be said therefore, that the Romans were aware, that adult character is contingent on 'external influences as well as innate qualities, as sometimes reflected in the writings of historians, Juvenal (Sat. 14.1ff), and in others like Cicero (ad. Att. 10.11), on finds evidence of an intense awareness of the potential impact on the Mores of the child's early upbringing of the teacher, and later the whole range of social influences. Horace (Sat.1.4.10ff) stresses the importance of young men developing a capacity for moral self-direction and control of emotion and desires. When Agrippina was reported in Suetonius (Nero, 52.1) to have said that too much philosophy was harmful to anyone who had to rule and subsequently made efforts to discourage it for her son (Nero), she was aware of the influence of external factors on a young adults' character-formation.

In a similar vein, Sallust, in the *Bellum Catillinae*, referred his own *imbecilla aetas*, which was temporarily corrupted by the *Mores* of his society: and taken over by *ambitio mala*. Tacitus was aware of Nero's *imbecilla aetas*, when in (*Ann. XIV.56.12ff*) he makes him echo these famous lines in his apparent effort to dissuade Seneca from retirement.

Quin, si qua in parte lubricam adulescentiae nostrae declinat,
revocas ornatumque robor subsidio impensius regis!^{vii}

If youth's slippery paths lead me astray, be at hand to call me
back You equipped my manhood: devote even greater care to
guiding it!^{viii}

This instability of youth and the possibility of it being easily
influenced is further highlighted in Cicero's defence of Caelius.
Youth is described as a *tempus infirmum* exposed to the *multae
viae adulescentiae lubricae*, which nature herself offers.

Plutarch in his moral essays was also of the view that character-viewpoint
can be combined with a strong interest in the formation of character, that is,
the factors that enhance the development of excellence or defectiveness in
'ethos'. His writing of biography was designed as improved character of
others and to help him improve his own, by providing examples of
excellence *αρετη*, combined with some instances of defectiveness, 'kakia'^{ix}
In the education of children, he sees (arête) – virtue as the result of *physis*,
ethos and logos, working hand in hand. According to Plutarch, the
attainment of *ιδιαν γθοουεοτιαν* ^x 'stable character' is sometimes a rare
achievement and therefore one that requires special efforts. He therefore
lays greater stress on innate, genetically inherited, *φισις* (innate nobility
or its opposite). Plutarch appears to take the view that a man's innate
qualities are not necessarily expressed in the ethical character he eventually
develops. He further argues that the susceptibility of human nature to
modification, explains why: many rulers show changes, in the course of
their rule and he presents a series of examples of rulers who began as harsh
and tyrannical and ended as mild and humane^{xi}.

Apparently, he considers the attempt to switch from good to bad
character problematic, that is, the notion of *μεταβολη φυθεωσ* And regards
as the innate and unchanging element in character and *ηθος* (ethos) as the
mutable or acquired element. Afranius Burrus and Anneus Seneca appear to
have battled unsuccessfully against Plutarch's *μεταβολη φυσεωσ* in

Nero as Tacitus relates in (Ann. XIII. 2.1ff) how Seneca and Burrus made joint efforts:

Quo facilius lubricam principis aetatem, si virtutem aspernaretur, voluptatibus concessis retinerent

in controlling the emperor's perilous adolescence, their method was to restrain his deviation from virtue, into permissible indulgence.

In this particular case study, the duo's attempts at moral guidance were ineffective and unfruitful. Hence the words *si virtutem aspernaretur voluptatibus concessis retinerent*. But then this may not be so in every case, due to the determining power of innate character. And apparently, Nero's combination or more aptly his already developed bad character, although *abditis vitiis*ⁱⁱⁱ, in addition to the absolute power conferred on him at an early age of seventeen, made his own case complex indeed. From the day he read out his pledge to adopt the Augustan model (as composed by Seneca), already two influences were at daggers drawn in a grim struggle to dominate the youthful and impressionable *princeps*. Burrus and Seneca were pitched against Agrippina. Both parties' real intention was the control of executive power in the empire; while to the whole world it was believed that Nero was the Emperor.

Meanwhile his education in philosophy and academic oratory was effectively directed by Seneca and other philosophers, such as the peripatetic Alexander of Aegae and the Stoic Chaeremon of Alexandria, a famous proponent of Hellenistic culture of the period. A combination of these two experiences was gradually shaping the young man's innate penchant for the liberal arts. And already he had seen this as an avenue to launch his primacy for true greatness as *princeps*. The battle line was drawn, between the young *princeps* desire for the *studium...sine gravitate* on the one hand, and the uncompromising Roman tradition

By the year 55, the personality of the traditional Nero, resolute, theatrical and stained with crime, was already formed. Tacitus' account shows a conviction that Nero had been strongly possessed with strong *vitia abdita*, although, hitherto *adhuc*, his mother's opposition was equally strong. But then the influence of his mentors, whose real motive was to shield him as much as possible from the day-to-day administration of the empire, was not so much a threat to his exhibition of these vices. All they

could hope for was to curtail his excesses. They had more or less no powers of sanction over the *princeps*. Invariably, Nero's character development and by extension his personality, evolved basically along the lines theorized by ancient philosophers and historians.

From an early age, he betrayed what Dowdell (1978) terms temperamental qualities which were a product of his innate psychophysical constitution. These formed the basis of what Garzetti, had earlier referred to as his particular concept of princeps power, by virtue of which he exercised despotic powers. Indeed, Nero's philhellenic tendency was more or less ossified at this point, he would not brook rivalry from any quarters, neither from his mother as well as tutors nor his other contemporaries. Tacitus aptly states in (Ann. XIV. 13)

*sequel in omnis libidinis effudit quas male coercitas
qualiscumque matris reverentia tardaverat.*

He plunged unrestrainedly into all kinds of wantonness, which respect for his mother had hitherto retarded but not repressed.

This tendency had already taken root, no wonder, *se in omnis libidins effudit*, but his respect for Agrippina merely restrained, but could not repress it. According to Tacitus' account, the year AD55 marked the turning point in the bloom of Nero's character-formation. During the previous year, AD54, he had more or less carried out perfunctory administrative gestures, which won him the loyalty of both Senate and nobility, including the Roman public and provincials. The culmination of these gestures, especially the exoneration of swearing allegiance to the imperial acts by a fellow consul, won him accolade for clemency. Thereafter, the princeps gave full rein to his caprices, which were no longer under any form of sanction from his tutors and mother. Against his mother's wishes he contracted a conjugal arrangement with a freedwoman-Claudia Acte and committed himself to playing the lyre, all within the year 55. During this period too, the *princeps* embarked on nocturnal expeditions. Under the cover of darkness, the emperor's perversions were given full expression. He would roam the city with his comrades in crime, under the cover of darkness, committing acts of violence, robbing and assaulting innocent citizens, both males and females. Tacitus' accounts of the behaviour of Nero appear more in consonance with the theory of degeneration, rather than that of unchanging character. At each turn of event, his innate penchants always rebelled against decorum.

His desire to achieve prominence in the field of liberal arts propelled him towards a comparison of his talent and literary tastes to that of ancient kings and even the gods.

During periods such as this, the influence of his mentors could not hold sway' (Ann. XIV. 14).

Nec iam sisti poterat, cum Senecae ac Burro visum ne utraque pervinceret alterum concedere.

There was no stopping him now, but Seneca and Burrus tried to prevent him from gaining both his wishes by conceding one of them. (M. Grant).

Seneca, early in Nero's reign presented him with the image of absolute power, in order to actualise his sense of responsibility. Nero was made to believe in the philosophy which recognizes good in the will and none in the act; so that, when Nero began eliminating individuals he perceived as a threat to his principate, although there is no evidence that Seneca was party to these acts, especially the deaths of Britannicus in AD 55 and Agrippina in AD 59, he does not appear to have protested much against these acts. Perhaps, the treatise contained in the *de Clementia* succeeded in doing more harm to the young emperor than Seneca may have intended. This was a treatise supposedly on good governance, meant to help Nero cultivate and practice clemency. But then, Nero was made to see himself as larger than life, he is made to say to himself:

I have been selected to perform on earth the office of the gods.
I am lord of life, death and destiny. But I bear the sword of severity sheathed, and wear instead the breastplate of clemency. (De Clem 1.1.1.4).

Further too, Nero is made to see himself as the Sun, which does not appear in public, but rises. Now, language such as this is an elixir, for a mind such as that of Nero, which degenerates into that of a despot. And so, Nero saw his 'breastplate of clemency', as the attribute of an absolute monarch and a license for brutality.

Clothed in such divine garb, Nero had no restraints any longer. His innate desires, which all along yearned for an escape, finally began to express themselves. Who after all could question the acts of a god? He went ahead and murdered his mother in AD 59, and as usual this crime was justified by

his guardian, who wrote letters to the Senate explaining it away (Tac. Ann. (XIV 10).

Invariably, the elimination of Britannicus in AD 55, an apparent heir to the throne, and the murder of Agrippina would have been in keeping with his mentor's philosophical practicalities of state administration, the one a rival whose elimination would secure the throne, while the other would end a woman's ambition for a regency with the emperor, thereby ensuring the emperor's freedom to pursue his public and private aspirations. The emperor himself, according to Tacitus (Ann. XIII. 17), gave an indication to this effect in the following words:

Ceterum et sibi amisso fratris auxilio reliquas spes in re publica sitas et tanto magis fovendum patribus populoque principem qui unus superesset familia summum ad fastigium genita.

Now that he had lost his brother's help, he added, all his hopes were centred on his country; Senate and people must give all the greater support to their emperor, the only remaining member of his family, exalted by destiny. (M. Grant.)

Indeed, if Agrippina had realized the moral qualification of Seneca: who was exiled in AD 41, before appointing him tutor for her only son, she probably would have had a second thought. But then she went ahead and appointed him, and to all intents and purposes, he did a good job of his calling. On the other hand, it may not be out of place to conjecture that Nero might not have turned out as bad as he did, if he did not have a tutor with Seneca's reputation for inconsistency. Yet, Seneca came highly recommended, among the philosophical and literary minds of the period. Having trained under masters of his age, such as Mamercus, Scaurus, Gallio, among others, he had developed a style which, he presumptuously felt was ideal for his young student.

The character of Seneca presents inconsistencies which have variously generated commendations and condemnations from some ancient commentators, P Suillus in AD 58, had this to say of him as recorded by Dio Cassius (LXI 10)

...he preached against tyranny, and tutored a tyrant. He ran down the hangers-on of those who held power, but he was never far from the palace. He condemned flattery, but was forever currying favour with Messalina and Claudius'

freedmen. He became a millionaire while castigating the possession of wealth. He had no morals.

What a model philosopher, for an impressionable mind such as young Neros'. The author of the *Annales* also had his impression of Seneca. This idiosyncrasies and philosophy (Ann. XII. 42).

Simul studiis inertibus et iuvenum impertiae suetum vivereis qui vividam et incorruptam eloquentiam tuendis civibus exercerent.. Romae testamenta et orbos velut indagine eius capi, Italiam et provicia immense faenore hauriri:

“His experience lies in cloistered scholarship with inexperienced young men; he casts a jaundiced eye on those whose eloquence is alive and unspoiled and used to defend their fellow citizens... In Rome his nets spread for childless testators; his rates of interest are in process of milking Italy and the provinces dry. (M. Grant.)

Stripped of his theoretical morality, Seneca becomes as fallible as any other Roman citizen. This is more so for the deplorable discrepancies between his utterances and actual practice, which were grossly highlighted by authors such as P. Suillus and Dio Cassius, who has been unjustly accused of bias in his enumeration of Seneca's 'immoralities' and inconsistencies. Yet the same Seneca has been variously praised for the excellence of Nero's *quinquennium*, for instituting a policy of religious tolerance and a moderation of cruelty in the gladiatorial shows of the arena. With the administrative machinery, firmly thrust on him and Burrus, he had made sure that, true to the pledge which he made through the young *princeps*, that private and Public considerations would be separate was actually carried out to the letter, at least for the duration of the *quinquennium*.

Despite all the indictments made by ancient historians regarding the character of Seneca, whether substantiated or otherwise, the issue stands to reason, from an extensive account of his activities during the Neronian reign that Seneca lacked true moral chivalry. Circumstances under which he appeared to assert his principles and the wisdom of his philosophical leanings had a debilitating effect on his courage. It is plain to see, that Nero's stronger character-traits, which were manifested in his aesthetic tastes and social charm would have lulled his high conscience into pusillanimity. Indeed, the extravagant opulence and overbearing depravity of Nero's

court, were sufficient a force to stifle the moral sense of the sternest of counsellors. Carlyle (1893), in an essay to Diderot, was quite succinct, when he noted of Seneca:

So wistfully desirous to stand well with truth and yet not ill with Nero (and) he remains our perhaps niceliest proportioned half and half, the plausiblest plausible on record.^{xiii}

It would be difficult to insist that fate did not have a hand in the coming together of Agrippina and Seneca and the evolution of Nero as narrated by Tacitus in the Annals. Agrippina may have perceived the yoking of like-minds in Seneca, to have insisted on his being her son's tutor. Though this conjuncture may not be pursued too far, yet it can be gleaned from the historian's character-sketch of both of them that, they possessed that streak of *ambitio mala*, which Tacitus' major protagonists betray. Their common tool was intrigue. Both were also versed in it. They had this intensely innate craving for power: Seneca's was the acquisition of power through wealth and philosophy; Agrippina schemed her way through her son's accession to the throne. At the end of the day, both forces made a convergence at the imperial court, with the youthful and impressionable Nero as a pawn. But then, either deliberately or inadvertently, they underestimated the capacity of Nero's *physis*, as indicated in Plutarch's essays

The young man's *ambitio*, was only impeded by their intrigues at court. In fact, his urge to assert his despotic power, which, though temporarily delayed, was to manifest itself in the field of private caprice. This was in complete conflict with the Roman tradition which they represented and which incidentally was an obstacle to the realization of his dream. At intervals he intervened in the business of state to the extent that facilitated his private interests. Indeed, the account of his actions recorded in Tacitus' Ann. XIII. 11.2, covering the years 34 and 55, may have been deliberate, on his part, to assuage and palpate the disposition of both the Roman public, his ministers and mother, preparatory to launching his natural tendencies.

Invariably, the combination of both forces was probably disastrous to his monstrosity, Agrippina practically drove him into committing his earliest crimes.^{xiv} Her openly confrontational attitude towards a precocious yet impressionable youth precipitated the reactions Tacitus recorded, and did more damage to her cause than she had expected. Meanwhile, Seneca, through his modernized philosophical dogma, turned a blind eye to the

princeps' burgeoning capriciousness, preparing to keep him as distant as possible from the affairs of state, but some allowances may be made for Seneca's inability effectively to practicalise his philosophical dogmas on the actions of the emperor, even though he may have had good intentions. In a similar vein too, Agrippina apparently may have had sincere maternal intentions for her son, although between appearances and reality, her role in the shaping of Nero's eventual personality had left much to be desired.

The foregoing appears to bear out the tendency in ancient philosophical theory, as indicated in Suetonius and Tacitus that the removal of rivals accelerates moral decline.^{xv} Similarly, Tacitus' account actually favours the view that the situation facilitated his betrayal of innate evil tendencies yet in what appears a different mood, he ascribes to Luscius Arruntius (*Ann.* VI 48.2) the question whether:

an cum Tiberius post tantam rerum experientiam vi dominationis convulsus et mutatus sit.

If Tiberius with all his experience has been transformed and deranged by absolute power, would Gaius embrace better policies? (Grant M.).

Here, Tacitus makes the point about the change of character in Tiberius that occurred late in life about AD 37, *post tantum rerum experientiam*. "after so much experience", *vi dominationis convulsus*... it was shaken to the core by power of sovereignty. Yet Tacitus still appears to have pursued the line of thought that neither Tiberius nor Nero's character changed, degenerated or collapsed, but was simply concealed until all external restraints were removed and they felt they could reveal it.^{xvi} The likelihood of the above situation is hinted at in a revealing passage of Tacitus,

(*Ann.* XIV 3^{xvii} in which, the writer sees his *libidinis* as *coercitas*. Tacitus does not give an indication that it was a case of *mores mutati*, but rather his true character as chained, confined, while his mother lived, because it was waiting for the right time to reveal itself, although, was merely held back. A similar impression was conveyed earlier concerning Tiberius' *saevitia*, which, though it was impressed, broke out at intervals.^{xviii}

However, this is to dismiss the possibility of reading these passages as indicative of degeneration, rather than of unchanging character, from Tacitus' account. But there appears an underlining plausibility that Tacitus adopted this view, which at times conflicts with some of his account,^{xix}

because like some ancient writers,^{xx} he was incapable of conceiving a change of character which, as stated earlier, was considered immutable. It is difficult, too, to insist that he adopted the same line of argument in the character delineation of his protagonists, while he deliberately gives us a generic insight into Tiberius' character-formation, as a reason for his tyrannical nature later in life. He, however, does not use the same style for Nero.

At (Ann. 1.4.3) he says of Tiberius; *Vetere atque insita Claudiae familiae superbia*, a reading of which may be interpreted to imply that his superbia was inherited from the Claudian household which was noted for such character-traits. The reference however may not be alluding to the possibility of Tiberius' character being solely innately derived, in which case Tacitus would be denying the existence of extraneous factors, as already indicated in the thinking of ancient philosophical theorists. But when he says: *multaque indicia saevitiae quaquam premantur, erumpere*, he seems to confirm our earlier conjecture of the possibility of a genetic transmission of superbia. Thus, syntactically both words-*superbia* and *saevitia* maybe alluding to the same thing, that is, an innateness of character-trait, which although repressed, broke out at intervals.

Again, in another passage Tacitus points out an important feature of Tiberius' character-dissimulation, a concealed and deeply rooted capacity for cruelty and hatred. Tacitus may not have adopted the same style in his treatment of Nero's character delineation, but he does not fail to give indications as to the possible innateness of some of his character-traits as well as the contributory influences from without i.e. advisers, friends, and his inordinate lust for power, among others.

In *Ann.* XVI. 18, when the notorious Ofonius Tigellinus, Nero's *praefectus vigilum*, and counselor in vice, denounced Gaius Petronius, out of jealousy; *ergo crudelitatem principis, cui ceterae libidines cedebant adgreditur*, perhaps it should be pointed out here that his choice of *crudelitas* in lieu of *saevitia* may not be indicative of a change in his line of thought as was seen earlier in Tiberius' case, *saevitia* standing rather merely for linguistic variation. Nor does he give any overt indication that Nero's personality did not betray signs of the famous *Claudiae familiae superbia*, since he was also of the same line of descent.

Again, in *Ann.* XIV. 4, in the account of Nero's plans to commit matricide, Tacitus notes that Nero tarried with her whether to complete the

act of pretence or whether the final sight of his mother imposed for check on a mind no matter how savage:

*sue periturae matris supermus aspectus quamvis ferum animum
retinebant*

We are further reminded of the person of Nero. The writer may here be alluding to the essence of Nero, the heart and soul as the seat of feeling, his very nature referred to, in that his *animus* is *ferus*, that is, wild or unbridled. In other words, his very essence was brutal. This being the case, therefore, a measure of credit could be given to Tacitus and other historians, in that a combination of innate character or Plutarch's *physis*, and other extraneous factors, were an elixir to the final revelation of itself. Such a situation could come about either through the elimination of rivals or the acquisition of absolute power, both of which would constitute an absence of restraint.

Tacitus also shows in his account that the influence of Nero's bad advisers further aided the degeneration of his character. He gives this indication in some passages which fit the same theory on Tiberius and his adviser and 'partner in labour-Sejanus. According to the account, Sejanus' craving for power and uncontrolled wantonness and brutality, drove him to destroy people he identified as the emperor's enemies. Apparently, these were individuals whom he saw as obstacles against his ambition for the throne.

This pervasive theme also recurs in his account of Nero and his helpers in crime. Indeed, the year 62, witnessed a crescendo in the emperor's struggles to free himself of all restraints. It began with the trials of Antistius Sosianus, accused by Cassutianus Capito and Fabricius Veiento of treason. The year also saw the death of Burrus and shortly after, the retirement of Seneca, both were replaced by disreputable characters Faenius Rufus and Ofonius Tigellinus-prefect of corn supply and *praefectus vigilum* respectively. The latter also combined his official duties with the counsellorship of Nero in vice.

With the collaboration and advice of both men, the emperor set about eliminating those he saw as possible rivals and claimants to the throne. Thus, Faustus Cornelius Sulla and Rubellius Plautus were accused of revolutionary intrigues and were put to death, with the Senate acquiescing and applauding the crimes of the *princeps*. Tacitus' account in (*Ann.* XIV. 57) elucidates the deleterious effect of Tigellinus on Nero:

perculso seneca promptum fuit Rufum Faenuem imminuere Agrippinae amicitiam in eo criminantibus. validiorque in dies Tigellinus et malas artes, quibus solis pollebat, gratiores ratus si principem societate scelerum obstringeret, metus eius rimatur' compertoque et Sullam maxime timeri...

After Seneca's elimination, it was easy to bring down Faenus Rufus, who was accused of friendship with Agrippina. Tigellinus became powerful daily, but he felt his criminal aptitudes - the only qualities he possessed - would influence the emperor more if he could make them partners in crime. Studying Nero's fears, Tigellinus found he greatly dreaded Rubellius Plautus and Cornelius Sulla Felix. (Grant, M. 1961).

Gone were the last vestiges of tangible constraints to Nero's exercise of absolute power. Gone his old advisers, the ones that saw the empire through the *aureum quinquennium*. It should, however, be pointed out at this juncture, that there is an apparent inconsistency, which should not be construed as fallacious, between theory and practice. Most of the philosophical theories of the ancients on character-formation appear very much at variance with reality, especially when looked at from their narratives. Nevertheless, there are recurring themes in the writings of the authors that have been examined, so far in this study, especially Tacitus: the belief *ab initio*, by both Greek and Romans in innateness and immutability of character. The possibility of this innate character being influenced by forces, such as education, family, friends and advisers.

Ancient theorists as seen earlier could not conceive of a character change whether good or bad, rather they have a tendentious belief in the possible 'collapse' or 'run aground', indeed Plutarch found the notion of degeneration of character in adult life rather problematic. He considers *εποκελλειν* only possible where rivals have been eliminated, a theme that appears to have been validated in Tacitus' accounts.

But then degeneration of character as interpreted by Lucius Arruntius in the *Annales* of Tacitus is another theory which has been suggested by Tacitus as a possible explanation for the behaviour of Nero, especially towards the end of his reign. This situation was not however spontaneous but engendered through the actions of the individuals who surrounded the emperor, these included those close to him, such as his tutor/advisers,

Seneca and Burrus, who decided to turn a blind eye to his *libidines* during their days in active service. Then the climax featuring his degenerative years, according to the account, was the appointment of Ofonius Tigellinus—his Vice Counsellor, who apparently made matters worse.

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Notes

- i Garzetti A. *A history of the Roman Empire, AD 14-192*, pp. 147-150.
- ii Syme, LR (1958) Tacitus, P. 42ff
- iii Tacitus, loc. cit.
- iv Grant M. trans] Peng. Ed.
- v Grant M. Peng Ed., transl.
- vi See, Russell D A., on Reading Plutarch's Lives, G & R 13 (1966) p. 140ff.
- vii Tac. Loc. Cit.
- viii Grant M. Peng Ed., transl.
- ix See, Russell D A., on Reading Plutarch's Lives, G & R 13 (1966) p. 140ff.
- x Russell, D.A. Plutarch, pp. 93-6. "The Attainment of Stable Character".
- xi Guthrie K.C. (1961). *A History of G.K. Phil.*, Cambridge.
- xii "his still concealed vices".
- xiii Carlyle, T. (1939) *Critical and Misc. Essays* Lond.
- xiv *The Murder of Heir-apparent-Britannicus*,
- xv Suet Gaius 6.2 Suet. Tib. 61.1 (change at the death of Sejanus).
- xvi Ibid. op.cit. ;
- xvii See quotation above.
- xviii Tac. Ann. 1.4.3.
- xix See ref. To Ann. VI. 48.2, above.
- xx See ref: To Syme and Oglivie above.
- xxi Although the kind of superbia, Tac. Refers to here could have been acquired in the Claudian household, it is assumed he meant the innate trait in Tiberius.

xxii See Tac. Ann. 1.7.7, 1.10.7, 1.11.2 etc.

xxiii Both words are similar in meaning, but crudelitas gives a sense of inhumanity.

xxiv Tac. Ann. 4.1.1., 4.20ff

xxv See analysis of the theories above.

xxvi Wardman, A. (1979) Plutarch's lives, London.

xxvii Op. cit., above.

xxviii They were manifested in the promotion of his philhellenic artistic pursuits, and the elimination of rivals, including mother, Agrippina