

# Alexandrian Identity and the Coinage Commemorating Nero's "Liberation" of the Greeks\*

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The emperor Nero visited Greece in 66–67 CE to compete in the prestigious festivals of old Greece. He declared the Greeks of Akhaea and the Peloponnese "liberated" during his visit. Apart from the cities affected by his munificence or visited by him, only Alexandria clearly commemorated his visit on coins. It issued a prolific series of commemoratives celebrating the central festival deities of old Greece. I place Nero's "liberation" in the context of the activities of the Greek upper classes in the period 50–250 CE. I argue that the issue of the Alexandrian coins can be most plausibly explained by assuming that the governor of Egypt, a Hellenised lapsed Jew aptly named Tiberius Julius Alexander, was attempting to curry favour with the philhellenic Nero and the Alexandrian Greeks. The Alexandrian Greeks wanted to affirm that Alexandria was truly Greek as they felt threatened by Jewish claims to equal privileges.

## Nero's visit to Greece

In 66–67 CE, the philhellenic emperor Nero visited Greece to compete and win in the prestigious games of old Greece, the Olympic, Pythian, Nemean and Isthmian. He also competed in the ancient but less prestigious Argive games. In addition, he competed in the Aktian games, minor games revived by the emperor Augustus to commemorate his victory over Anthony and Cleopatra near Aktion, and declared by the Romans to be equal in status to the others. (The older games were held in Olympia, Delphi, Nemea, Korinthos and Argos. The revived Aktian games were moved by Augustus to Nikopolis, the city built to commemorate his victory.) The games would normally be held over a series of years, but were rescheduled for Nero's convenience. While in Greece, Nero "liberated" the province of Akhaea, which meant in practice that it was exempted from some taxes and liberated

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Nero



Alexandria



Isthmian Poseidon



Aktian Apollo



Agathos Daimon

from direct Roman rule. However, this event was of considerable symbolic significance. In an inscription from Akraephia in Boeotia which records Nero's speech in Korinthos, the speech of the local high priest Epaminondas dedicating an inscription to Nero as Zeus the liberator is also recorded. Amongst the nauseating phrases which are common in referring to emperors, Epaminondas calls Nero "fillelin" (Smallwood, 1967:35–36).

It is clear from a number of later writers that Nero's "liberation" was regarded as an act of great beneficence long afterwards by Greeks. It was the one thing that even Greeks who detested Nero could admire. In his dialogue "On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance", which was probably written in the nineties CE, Plutarch has one of his characters claim to have seen Nero's soul after death run through with red hot rivets as a divine punishment. Nero is about to be turned into a viper when we are told that suddenly, a voice arose from an intense light to intercede to have Nero's soul transferred to a frog, a more inoffensive species; "as he had paid the penalty for his crimes, and a piece of kindness too was owing him from the gods, since to the *genos* which among his subjects was noblest and most beloved of heaven he had granted freedom" (Plutarch, *Moralia*, 567F–568A).<sup>1</sup> ("Genos" is commonly translated as "nation", but means something more like ethnic group.) The travel writer Pausanias, writing about 150–170 CE, deplores many of Nero's crimes and his looting of statues from Greece. However, he says of Nero's "liberation" of Greece "When I considered this act of Nero it struck me how true is the remark of Plato, the son of Ariston that the greatest and most daring crimes are committed, not by ordinary men, but by a noble soul corrupted by a perverted education (*atopou paideais*)" (Pausanias 7.17). In a work written around 220 CE, Philostratus says that "Nero restored the liberties of Hellas with a wisdom and moderation quite alien to his character; and the cities regained their Doric and Attic characteristics, and a general rejuvenescence accompanied the

<sup>1</sup> References to ancient authors are according to convention. References are to line numbers and/or sections of standard editions. These are repeated in all reputable modern editions.

institution among them of a peace and harmony such as not even ancient Hellas ever enjoyed" (Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius*, 41).

In any case, Nero's "liberation" was commemorated by issues of copper coins in cities who were affected by his beneficent liberation. The Roman colony of Korinthos issued coins with Latin inscriptions depicting Nero addressing the Korinthians (RPC 1, 1205).<sup>2</sup> Patras, also a Roman colony, issued coins with Latin inscriptions with Jupiter the Liberator (RPC 1, 1279). Sikyon issued coins with Greek inscriptions with Zeus Eleutherios (RPC 1, 1238–44). And so on. However, Alexandria in Egypt is the only city not affected by his "liberation" known to have commemorated Nero's visit. It issued a prolific series of coins depicting Nero on one side and the tutelary deities of the games in which he participated on the other — Olympian Zeus, Nemean Zeus, Isthmian Poseidon, Argive Hera, Pythian Apollo and Aktian Apollo (RPC 1, 5306–5318). Why should Alexandria have issued these coins and why did it commemorate the games in which Nero participated in old Greece? To answer this question, we will first need to discuss Roman coinage, the views of Greeks and the situation in Alexandria.

## Coinage in the Time of Nero

The coinage of the Roman Empire at this time can be divided into three broad groups. The first is the coinage used in the western empire, which was nearly all produced in Rome or in Lugdunum (Lyons) in Gaul. This honours important personifications like Roma, celebrates the imperial virtues and commemorates events of empire wide significance. It also sometimes commemorates events in Rome, like Nero's foundation of Greek style quinquennial games (RIC 1, 91–2). The types of the mint of Rome are imitated at Lugdunum (and at a Balkan mint). There is no commemoration of Nero's visit to Greece in this coinage.<sup>3</sup> The gold coinage produced in the western mints circulated throughout the empire. The silver coinage circulated in some of the eastern provinces, often side by side with the regional and local coinage of the eastern part of the empire.

The second group of coinage is the regional coinage of the eastern empire. This circulated only in particular regions. Much of this was produced in Caesaria in Cappadocia, Antioch in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt. Very large numbers of coins were produced, particularly in Egypt. In the last part of five years of Nero's reign it is clear that immense numbers of coins were minted at Alexandria. Using statistical techniques for estimating numbers of coins originally produced from

<sup>2</sup> In referring to coin types, I have followed the convention of having an abbreviated reference to the relevant volumes of Roman Provincial Coinage or Roman Imperial Coinage as well as to the number of the coin type.

<sup>3</sup> Smallwood lists a western style coin depicting Jupiter the Liberator (Smallwood, 1967:37). However, according to the editors of RIC 1 it may well be a modern counterfeit. See RIC 1:154.

the numbers of dies used to produce surviving specimens, Christiansen estimated that more than 600 million coins were produced in five years (Christiansen, 1988: 308).<sup>4</sup> His method of estimating output may be questioned; however, it is generally accepted that the output from the mint of Alexandria in these years was immense. With the exception of the coinage of Caesarea and some of the coinage of Antioch, this coinage bears Greek inscriptions and it often modifies pre-existing Greek types and weight standards. However, apart from the coinage of Alexandria, there is no coinage referring to Nero's visit to Greece. Some of it has topical references. For instance, the coinage of Caesarea depicts the local sacred mountain, Mount Argaeus.

The third group of coinage is the local coinage of the eastern empire which circulated in the territory of a city or of a *koinon* (community of cities). This coinage, which typically has inscriptions in Greek, often uses symbols of local significance and sometimes commemorates events of local significance. We have already seen that some cities Nero affected by Nero's beneficence commemorated his visit. (The Roman colonies in Greece, such as Korinthos, used Latin on their commemoratives.)

There had been a local coinage in the western empire, but western mints gradually ceased to mint local types. Such coinage ceased by the end of the reign of Claudius (54 CE). The mint of Lugdunum ceased to mint regional issues in the reign of Claudius and only minted the same types as the mint of Rome after his reign. By contrast, in the eastern part of the empire, local and regional coinage continued up to the 250's CE. Indeed, the local and regional coinage of eastern mints is prolific. Why so? The authors of the standard work on Roman Provincial Coinage argued that the explanation could only be political. They proposed that gradually the emperors or their representatives refused to grant local authorities the right to mint local coinage (RPC 1:18–19). However, one of them, Andrew Burnett, has changed his mind. He now argues that the most plausible explanation is that while most of the provincial elite in the western empire thought of themselves as thoroughly Roman from an early date, in the eastern empire many of them thought of themselves as primarily Greek and/or as having a local identity (Burnett, 2005). Burnett brings up a range of evidence including the following: 1) Some inscriptions in the eastern empire on stone and on coinage refer to western Roman denominations as if they are denominations of a foreign power. 2) What was depicted on local coinage of the western part of the empire in its later stages very closely imitated what was depicted on the coinage of Rome. 3) The denominations and weight standards of the western coinage closely resemble those of Rome. 4) It is clear from evidence derived from sources apart from coins that whole communities or areas sought political privileges like citizenship. By contrast, in the east cities competed for status with each other or for imperial

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Burnett informs me that Christiansen's methodology has been widely questioned.

recognition. They showed little interest in being Roman. Burnett's argument is part of an emerging body of work which interprets many of the motifs used in the coinage in the eastern part of the Empire in terms of the affirmation or creation of identities.

## The Greeks in the Roman World

When many people think of the Roman Empire they think of a Latin speaking bureaucracy and ruling class gradually Romanising the empire. In fact, it has long been known that the predominant language of administration, commerce and letters in the eastern part of the Roman Empire was Greek, at least up to about 250 CE. In the western part of the Empire, Greek was often understood and written by the Roman upper classes and by others, such as the Jews. We are told by Suetonius that the emperor Claudius, Nero's predecessor, wrote historical works in Greek, addressed Greek speaking envoys in Greek, often cited Homer and regarded the culture of Akhaea as part of his shared culture. Supposedly, having heard a barbarian speak in both Latin and Greek, Claudius started his reply with the words "since you have come equipped with both our languages..." (Suetonius, Claudius, 42). The fact that Suetonius thinks Claudius's attitude is worthy of note may indicate that Claudius was unusual in the degree of his philhellenism. However, some familiarity and respect for Greek culture was common amongst the Roman upper classes, even if it was often tinged with ambivalence.

A longstanding view amongst scholars has been that the Romans encouraged the Hellenisation of non-Greek peoples in the East as a way of making them friendly and tractable to Roman interests. Following on from this, there was a tendency to talk of "Greco-Roman culture" as if the culture of the empire was essentially one thing.

Simon Swain, amongst others, has recently criticized the notion of a single Greco-Roman culture. He has argued cogently that Greeks, and in particular members of the Greek speaking upper classes, regarded themselves as primarily Greek and distinguished themselves from the Romans, even when they were Roman citizens. The Greek upper classes often wrote literary works in Attic Greek and their writing was riddled with references to the literature of classical Greece. This way of writing functioned as a way of defining and affirming a group identity as Greeks who shared the culture of classical Greece, even when, like Lucian of Samosata or Heliodorus, they were of Syrian descent. It should be emphasized that this does not mean that they saw themselves as members of a Greek nation, or that they were necessarily opposed to Roman power. Indeed, part of the reason for the rise in the prestige of Attic Greek is that the Romans esteemed literature of the Classical period written in Attic (Swain, 1996:22–27). In any case, some of the Greek elite, like Plutarch and Appian, took a sympathetic interest in Roman history and Rome. However, many others had no serious interest in Roman history

or Roman culture. They usually regarded the Romans as not quite barbarians, but lacking *paideia* — a notion that is hard to translate but which means something like “culture” in this context. Nevertheless, highly Hellenised Romans, particularly emperors, were regarded as more or less Greek. To sum up, quoting Swain, “despite a long history of political segmentation built around local rather than ‘national’ patriotism, the Greeks continued to be fully conscious in our period (50–250 CE) of an essential shared cultural identity, mediated through a common language, that was defined not simply by its own coherence but at all times by differentiation from the *barbaroi* who lacked Greek culture and speech” (Swain, 1996:68).

The literary culture of Athens was crucial to the imagined identity of the Greek upper classes. However, the cult sites of old Greece also played an important part. The most prestigious and ancient games were located there. Swain points out that although Pausanias was a Greek from Asia Minor, an area with a long Greek history, it is the cult sites of old Greece, including the sites of the festivals, that he sees as centrally Greek (Swain, 1996:332).<sup>5</sup>

Swain stresses that Romans, often at the instigation (or with the connivance) of Greeks who benefited from the process, manipulated Greek traditions for entertainment and to serve Roman interests. Romans “came to Greece as philhellenes, not to admire what they found there passively and uncritically, but to shape it according to their pre-existing idea of what Greece was ... Romans expected to find the past when they journeyed to Greece in pursuit of culture. If they did not find it, they could always lament its decline and proceed to reconstruct the Greece they had been taught to imagine ...” (Swain, 1996:66). He points out that like the British in Africa and India, Romans worked with local status groups to bolster “traditions” that had never existed, to revive traditions that had long been obsolete and to make traditions central which had previously only been marginal. By making themselves the arbiters and patrons of what was truly Greek, the Romans increased their status and power in Greece while satisfying the ambitions of local elites who might otherwise have been rebellious (Swain, 1996:71–76).

## The Coinage of Egypt

It has long been clear that what was depicted on some of the coinage of the eastern empire could be tailored so as to satisfy local sensibilities. This has been brought out by studies of coinage minted for the Jews (Meshorer, 1967). However, there has been little work of this kind on the coinage of Roman Egypt. It was an unusual coinage. In some other parts of the eastern empire, western silver (and sometimes copper) coins circulated side by side with regional denominations. However, no silver and copper coins except those minted in Alexandria circulated in Egypt.

<sup>5</sup> Unlike other Roman philhellenes, Nero was not interested in Athens. He never visited it. His philhellenism focused on artistic and athletic competitions.

This seems to be because the Romans continued a system established by the Greek speaking bureaucracy of the Ptolemies. Everyone who traveled to Egypt who wanted to use coinage had to convert coins into Egyptian currency to the profit of the treasury. The standard part silver coin of Egypt in Nero's reign, the tetradrachm, was legally tariffed as equivalent to one western denarius; but it contained considerably less silver. Burnett's view, as stated earlier in this paper, does not seem to be needed to explain the persistence of the regional coinage of the Ptolemies in the Roman period. The profit to the treasury would have been sufficient incentive. However, the profit motive does not explain some of the peculiarities of the Egyptian coinage of Nero's reign.

In part, Nero's Alexandrian coinage is very similar to that of Rome. The titles he is given on the obverses are those he is given in Rome translated into Greek and abbreviated in the Roman manner. (By contrast, the mint of Antioch often follows Greek tradition and does not abbreviate Nero's titles — it uses fewer of them.) The reverses often depict hellenised versions of Roman personifications, such as Eirini (Pax, the Roman goddess of peace). Nevertheless, other reverses contain local elements. Alexandria is personified wearing an elephant skin on her head, a type which harks back to the early coinage of Ptolemaic Egypt, in which Alexander as conqueror of India was depicted wearing an elephant skin on his head. This is not surprising. Many other coinages of the eastern part of the Empire commemorate things of regional or local significance.<sup>6</sup>

Some types suggest a close link to Greek customs which have taken an Egyptian form. On the reverse of one type of tetradrachm, a snake with a Shkent, the Egyptian royal hat, is depicted. The abbreviated inscription reads NEO AGATH DAIM (RPC 5230). This appears to be a reference to Nero as *o neos agathos daimon tis oukoumenis* (the new good spirit of the world community). Nero is described in this way in a Greek papyrus produced at the time of his accession (Hunt and Edgar, 1956:139). Apparently, work on the cult of Agathos Daimon has shown that it had originally been an Athenian household cult which was transformed by the Alexandrian Greeks into an important state cult and was partly assimilated to Serapis, a god created by Ptolemaic monarchs to bring the Greek and Egyptian elements of the population together, and to various Egyptian deities (Fraser, 1972: 209–11). Such types do not fit well with the view that from the time of the Roman conquest of Egypt, Alexandria became almost a branch mint of the mint of Rome, translating Roman types into Greek for local consumption (Bland, 1996, Burnett, 2005a). The coins which are the subject of this paper fit this view even less. Nero's quinquennial games in Rome are not commemorated in the coinage of Egypt even though, as I have said, they are commemorated in the coinage of the mints of Rome and Lugdunum.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of material of local and regional significance in Syria, see Butcher, 2004:224–32.

Nero seems to have had very good relations with Alexandrian Greeks and, like his ancestor Antony, to have thought of himself as almost an Alexandrian Greek. His artistic performances in Naples had been cheered by Alexandrians and he was so impressed by them that he had a claue trained to applaud in the Alexandrian manner. He planned visits to Egypt twice and he is believed shortly before his death to be preparing to move to Alexandria to become a performer. Indeed, it seems there was a veritable Egyptomania in his reign (Suetonius, Nero, 19–20, 47, Dio 63.27, Tacitus, 15.36, Griffin, 1984:209–10, Champlin, 2003:172).

We know that at least from the time of the emperor Gaius Caligula (37–41 CE), who had tried to impose emperor worship on the Jews, there had been serious ethnic conflicts in Alexandria between the Greeks and the Jews. From the Roman conquest of Egypt, the Greeks of Alexandria had received important privileges from the Roman government which they guarded jealously (Lewis, 1983:25–29). These privileges were to some degree a continuation of the privileges they had had under the Ptolemies. As the citizen Greeks saw it, Jews were trying to usurp their privileges. (At least some of the Jews were Hellenised and may well have had as good a claim to being Hellenic as their rivals.) There is no sign that Nero took pains to distance himself from both sides, unlike his wise predecessor Claudius, who attempted to affirm the traditional roles and practices of Greeks and Jews after the disastrous reign of Caligula (Hunt and Edgar, 1934:79–89).

Josephus describes a riot which occurred in Alexandria at the beginning of the Jewish revolt in Judaea of 66–70 CE. The governor of Egypt was a Hellenised lapsed Jew, aptly named Tiberius Julius Alexander. According to Josephus, after trying to get the Jews to restrain themselves, he found he could not calm them. He called out the army which savagely suppressed the Jews (Josephus, 2.487–502).<sup>7</sup> In the highly charged atmosphere before and after the riot, it is likely that the Alexandrian Greeks or their supporters would have welcomed any opportunity to stress Alexandria's links with Greece. They would have wanted to affirm that to be a citizen of Alexandria was to have ancestral links with Greece and its pagan festivals. A lapsed Jew employed by a philhellenic emperor planning to visit Alexandria to perform in Greek festivals after "liberating" Greece would have wanted to demonstrate his Hellenism.

The governor of Egypt was in charge of financial matters. A plausible hypothesis is that Alexander had the coins in question minted to please the Greeks by affirming Alexandria's links to old Greece, thereby identifying Alexandria as truly Hellenic. If this hypothesis is correct, his strategy worked. In the revolt, the Greeks enthusiastically supported the Romans. As usual, the Romans suppressed it by making a desolation and calling it peace (Tacitus, Agricola 30). The wily Alexander became the chief of staff of Vespasian's son Titus towards the end of the Jewish

<sup>7</sup> Kraft notes that Josephus's account in *The Jewish War* may well be biased towards Alexander. Vespasian and Titus were supposed to read it and they were strong supporters of Alexander (Kraft, 1990).



revolt. Sadly, after Nero's death the victorious emperor Vespasian revoked Nero's "liberation" and even revoked the right of states in Akhaea to issue local coins, declaring that the Greeks "had forgotten how to be free" (Pausanias, 7.17, RPC 2:55).

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