

**The Use of Propaganda in Nero's Coinage:
Coin #14 of the Joel Handshu Collection
at the College of Charleston**

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For Roman emperors, coins were one of the most effective ways to convey an image of themselves to the masses. Because people all across the empire would necessarily see the images on coins, a great deal of effort was put into using them as propaganda promoting various aspects of the emperor's rule as well as celebrating the empire itself. The emperor Nero, who was notorious for many debaucheries and especially unpopular after the Great Fire in July AD 64, used coins in an attempt to project an image of himself as continuing the legacy of Augustus. Though Nero remained unpopular despite such efforts, his coins remain as an example of how emperors sought to represent themselves to the people.

Coin # 14 in the Joel Handshu collection at the College of Charleston library is a Roman *as* made from copper which bears an image of Nero on the obverse and a personification of Victory on the reverse (Figures 1 and 2). The coin possesses the deep greenish patina that copper assumes after many years. While the obverse is in very good condition with the inscription clear and legible and its image in excellent shape, the reverse is significantly worn and the details of its image are not as clearly discerned.

The obverse of the coin contains the inscription "*Nero Caesar Aug(ustus) Germ(anicus) Imp(erator)*," which encircles a portrait of Nero. The inscription is a shortened form of Nero's full name, Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus Germanicus, which he received upon his adoption by Claudius in AD 50.¹ The title of Augustus was received when he was granted the Tribunician, Consular, and Proconsular powers which made

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him *princeps* in AD 54 after Claudius's death.² The portrait of Nero is a unique example of the problems which artists faced in portraying him. Suetonius gives the following list of Nero's physical characteristics:

Height: average.
Body: pustular and malodorous.
Hair: light blond.
Features: pretty, rather than handsome.
Eyes: blue and rather weak.
Neck: squat.
Belly: protuberant.
*Legs: spindling.*³

Any artist approaching such a subject would face the challenge of how to portray these physical attributes in a way that would be flattering. Traditionally, artists had tried to depict emperors in one of two ways: either with genuine attempts at realism in order to convey some sense of the emperor's personality to his subjects handling the coins, or by contriving an idealization of the emperor which would make him seem more awe-inspiring, glossing over his less picturesque traits.⁴ Portraits from the earlier part of Nero's reign are considered to be in the realistic style and therefore present good indications of his true physical appearance, while those after AD 64 are thought to be a unique combination of the two styles. Combining the realistic and idealistic



Figure 1



Figure 2

styles they “aim at the exuberant splendor of a mighty Greek monarch, but to endow this ruler with the heavy, not to say bloated, features that the 27 year-old Nero actually possessed.”⁵

The portrait on Coin #14 seems to fit the later trend, an idealization which realistically contains the unique and somewhat weak traits which Nero is described as having. Nero is shown from the neck up, wearing a laurel wreath and a distinct flowing curled hairstyle which was considered somewhat offbeat (it is speculated that it was affected after a style popular among chariot racers).⁶ No attempt is made to give him a more conventional hairstyle befitting an emperor. The portrait includes the “squat neck” which Suetonius describes,⁷ and captures the sense of the emperor's corpulence by depicting his double chin. Yet even these transcend themselves due to the artist's positioning of the head on the neck at such an angle as to seem regal despite the extra weight. He appears benevolent as read from the slight smile on his lips, and his eyes, though deep-set, exude a sense of presence and confidence.

The reverse of the coin depicts a winged personification of Victory. The wear on the coin makes her wings hard to make out, but when the coin is inspected with a magnifying glass, they are clearly present. Victory wears a flowing gown and holds a shield bearing the single letter “S” in the far-left corner. To Victory's far left is inscribed a large “S”; to her far right a large “C.” The inscription “SC” was a common abbreviation for the phrase “*Senatus Consulto*,” meaning “by the decree of the Senate,”⁸ indicating that body's responsibility for the issue of the coin. While there is a great deal of debate over the extent of control which both parties had over minting coins, it can generally be stated that during the Principate, the Senate controlled the issue of bronze and copper coinage while the emperor controlled the issue of gold and silver coinage.⁹ Thus the “SC” on this coin indicates that it was issued by the Senate. The lone “S” on the shield is unusually placed for a letter. If it were meant to stand alone, it would be placed in a more prominent position on the shield. The placement on this coin suggests that there was likely more to the inscription than has survived. In several other coins depicting Victory with a shield, the shield bears the inscription “*S.P.Q.R.*,” an abbreviation for “*Senatus populus que Romanus*” (“the Senate and the Roman people”).¹⁰ This

inscription on the coin is the key to interpreting the symbolism behind the portrayal of Victory on the reverse and helps to provide the date of the coin.

This particular image of Victory carrying a shield with the inscription “*S.P.Q.R.*” had appeared only once before Nero’s reign, on coinage issued to commemorate Augustus’ death and deification.¹¹ The shield which Victory carries is the famous *clipeus virtutis*, or “shield of valor,” a golden shield which had been presented to Augustus by the Senate on the behalf of the people of Rome. This was a token of their thanks for his justice and clemency after the conflicts which brought him to power.¹² Coins bearing the image of Augustus on the obverse and Victory with the *clipeus virtutis* (identified as such by the inscription “*S.P.Q.R.*”) on the reverse were issued on a wide scale in AD 24, ten years after Augustus’ death. In AD 64, a new series of coins bearing the same reverse image of Victory bearing the *clipeus virtutis* were issued and released on a wide scale. The reverse of these coins commemorated the 50th anniversary of Augustus’ death and deification; the obverse bore a portrait of Nero. Thus the specific imagery on the reverse of the coin along with the unique aspects of the portrait on the obverse date it to AD 64.

The year AD 64 is an interesting date for Nero to issue coins relating to Augustus, as the notorious Great Fire which swept through Rome took place in July of that year. The Great Fire seems to be the climax of a long list of debaucheries which tarnished the emperor’s image, but it is important to note that Nero’s reign began with a great deal of promise and progressed smoothly for some time. In his AD 54 speech to the Senate upon receiving the powers of the *princeps*, Nero spoke of honoring the traditional role of the Senate as Augustus had done and repudiated the abuses of his predecessors Claudius, Gaius, and Tiberius. While each of the three previous emperors had made the same claims initially, Nero actually honored them: Tacitus claims that “these promises were implemented,” and that, indeed, “the Senate decided many matters.”¹³ During the early years of his reign, Nero was advised by the Praetorian Prefect, Burrus, and the philosopher, Seneca. Within the first year of Nero’s reign, these advisors managed to persuade him to break free from his domineering mother, Agrippina, who had brought him to the throne with the murder of Claudius and

who wished to control him from behind the scenes. When she was murdered by Nero in AD 59, the public put the blame on the advisors instead of the young emperor. He is even said to have received congratulations from the Senate and Army concerning her death.¹⁴ His reputation was not affected by this brutal act.

It was not until AD 62, when Burrus died and two new Commanders of the Praetorian Guard were appointed, that Nero's actions began to make the public uneasy. Gaius Ofonius Tigellenus and Faenius Rufus were appointed to the positions, Tigellenus for his "unending immoralities" and "evil reputation" which Nero found fascinating, and Rufus for his popularity with the people.¹⁵ After Burrus's death, Seneca resigned from his position as Nero's adviser, as "decent standards carried little weight when one of their two advocates was gone."¹⁶ With Tigellenus to support the outrageous and paranoid behavior which had previously been checked by Seneca and Burrus, Nero began to openly murder many of those around him to the disgust of the public. His treatment of his popular wife, Octavia, outraged many Romans. He first accused her of adultery with a slave and had her banished. Then swayed by his long-time mistress (and later wife) Poppaea, who was jealous of the public's support for Octavia, Nero accused Octavia of adultery with Anicetus, the commander of the Roman fleet at Micenum. Anicetus confessed to the act after having been bribed and Octavia was brutally murdered for her supposed guilt.¹⁷ Nero made public displays of thanksgiving for her death in temples around Rome.¹⁸

Instances such as this began to erode Nero's public image, but the greatest blow came in AD 64 with the controversy surrounding the Great Fire. Rumors circulated that agents of Nero had started the fire and prevented people from trying to put it out.¹⁹ When the fire had begun dying down, it flared up again, seeming to have been started anew on one of Tigellenus's estates.²⁰ It was thought that Nero disliked the appearance of the densely packed houses and crooked streets of the neighborhoods surrounding his palace and wanted to clear space for his planned new palace, the *Domus Aurea*. An extreme example of public perception of Nero's outrageous behavior was the famous rumor that he performed his poem *The Sack of Ilium* to the accompaniment of his lyre while watching the city burn.²¹ The extent of the devastation

was such that Tacitus reports that only four out of Rome's fourteen districts remained intact in the wake of the disaster.²² Though sources record that Nero instituted disaster relief measures, which included opening the grounds of his palace to those left homeless as well as importing grain into the city and cutting its price to less than 1/4 of a sesterce per pound,²³ and despite his efforts to shift the blame for the fire to the Christians residing in the city²⁴ the people still felt that he was responsible for the conflagration. His reputation in the public eye was ruined.

Amid this controversy the coins were issued which directly linked the image of Nero to one associated with Augustus. The image of the shield reminds the coin's holder of Augustus' actions which merited the conferment of this special honor, his virtue, piety, and clemency.²⁵ As Nero moved further away from these qualities in his own reign, it became more important that he seem to possess them in order to secure the public's goodwill. After the Great Fire, when favorable public opinion of Nero had declined drastically, attempts were made to portray him as a legitimate heir to Augustus' legacy. As coins provided the simplest means for distributing images of the emperor to all parts of the empire, the issue of such coins had the potential to influence the manner in which a variety of Roman subjects viewed Nero. However, these attempts failed. Nero was soon threatened by conspiracy from within his inner circle and rebellion in several parts of the empire. Declared a public enemy by the Senate and abandoned by the Praetorian Guard in AD 68, he committed suicide.²⁶ No amount of propaganda in the form of coins could erase the damage that he himself had done to his reputation.

Notes

¹ Sear, David R. *Roman Coins and their Values* (Seaby, 1988), p. 114.

² Sear, p. 115.

³ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves (Penguin, 1979), p. 244.

⁴ Grant, Michael. *Nero* (Dorset Press, 1970), p. 161.

⁵ Grant, *Nero*, p. 161.

⁶ Grant, *Nero*, p. 162.

⁷ Suetonius, p. 245.

⁸ Humphreys, H. Noel. *Abbreviations on Roman Coins* (Attic Books, 1971), p. 21.

⁹ Grant, Michael. *Roman History from Coins: Some Uses of the Imperial Coinage to the Historian* (Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 33.

¹⁰ Humphreys, p. 22.

⁹ Grant, *Nero*, p. 164.

¹⁰ Grant, *Roman History from Coins*, 21.

¹¹ Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. Michael Grant (Penguin, 1959), p. 276.

¹² Tacitus, p. 308; Suetonius, p. 232.

¹³ Tacitus, p. 326.

¹⁴ Tacitus, p. 326.

¹⁵ Tacitus, pp. 330-333.

¹⁶ Tacitus, p. 333.

¹⁷ Tacitus, p. 352.

¹⁸ Tacitus, p. 352.

¹⁹ Suetonius, p. 236.

²⁰ Tacitus, p. 352.

²¹ Tacitus, p. 352.

²² Tacitus, p. 354.

²³ Grant, *History from Roman Coins*, p. 21.

²⁴ Suetonius, p. 243.