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From Nero to Galba

Memoria principum: emergence and condemnation

Konstantinos Kakatsidas

Introduction

The memory of each Roman emperor and its exploitation by their immediate successors constituted matters of particular complexity, capable of securing both popular and aristocratic acceptance and, respectively, leading to manipulation and distortion. In this context, *damnatio memoriae* (condemnation of memory) was a parameter from which neither Nero nor Sulpicius Galba (hereafter Galba) managed to escape to a lesser or greater extent. In the current paper, I have chosen to look at these two emperors due to the milestone nature of the transition from the Julio-Claudian dynasty to the year of the Four Emperors (AD 68–69) in the political history of the Roman imperial period. Galba, as the first emperor after the generation that established one-man rule in Rome, had to manage the issue of the memory of his predecessors with particular care in order to satisfy those who supported him and to avoid arousing further opposition. At the same time, I consider the present historical moment to be of great importance, since it is the first time that the very nature of the imperial system of government has been tested, and the desires of its constituent parts (emperor, senate, army, *plebs*) have clashed. When looking at original sources, we see, interestingly, different attitudes emerging between how aristocrats and the *plebs* regarded issues of memory. The end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty (31 BC–AD 68) and the beginning of the Year of Four (AD 68 – Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian) were the reasons for the return of civil war to the capital of the Roman state. Undoubtedly, the Julio-Claudians, despite all the dark spots during their reign, maintained the peace and kept conflicts away from Rome and Italian territory for almost a century. However, Nero's reign was a turning point in the long reign of his dynasty and was largely responsible for the outcry and resentment of the aristocracy and the Senate. The aristocracy of the time wanted an immediate political change to rid the Roman state of a tyrannical and degenerate administration (that of Nero), but without clearly

advocating a new direction, a new ruler who would be able to work for the common good and heal the wounds caused by Nero's fourteen-year reign. Thus, when political change was brought about by Nero's disqualification and suicide (AD June 68), Galba, experienced in administrative and military positions, came to the fore. Galba was presented as the most suitable spokesman for the general discontent, especially among the provincial troops and their commanders, as well as the upper classes. He served as *princeps* (ruler) of the Roman state for only seven months (June AD 68–January AD 69). The violent end of his reign was followed by two more short-lived reigns – those of Otho and Vitellius, reigning 15 January to 16 April 69, and 19 April to 20 December 69, respectively – until the final reign of Vespasian in July AD 69, who inaugurated the Flavian dynasty and ruled for approximately ten years (AD 69-79).

Accordingly, primary sources (Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio, Plutarch) indicate that the Senate celebrated Nero's death, while the people, on the contrary, mourned and honoured him posthumously for a long time after his death. As for Galba, the situation is clearly simpler, as his brief reign (seven months, June AD 68–January AD 69) did not allow him to establish a good reputation and posthumous fame among the lower social strata. Regarding the political ideology of the two emperors, Nero, without ever advocating the opposite, implemented a policy already known from his predecessors, that often showed signs of deviation. Characteristic examples included the assassinations of prominent figures and the emperor's unusual, ethically problematic public participation in theatrical, athletic, and artistic events. On the other hand, Galba pursued an idealistic (as his political opponents managed to characterise him at least) mode of governance, which ultimately proved not only anachronistic and impractical but much more condemnatory and detrimental to himself.

The issue of *memoria*

The history of the first century AD is distinguished by a rich variety of sanctions and complex battles to remember the past. These battles were aimed at determining the power of the leading dynasty

and the various persons within it, (at determining) the position of the emperor and the very nature of the *principatus* original emphasis).¹

Flower's perspective on the Roman political history of the first century AD resonates significantly with the events following the death of Nero, as well as the political developments of the Year of the Four Emperors (AD 68–69). Nero's posterity, as the last descendant of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, continued to captivate the Roman state for an extended period, influencing the policies of subsequent leaders until at least the age of Domitian. There is no doubt that the issue of memory and *damnatio memoriae* became a contentious issue eliciting varied responses among different societal groups. On the one hand, Nero, even in death, maintained his popularity among the common people and certain segments of the military. On the other hand, the Senate and aristocracy expressed their satisfaction with the political shift (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.4). Both the first three rulers of the years AD 68-69 (Galba, Otho and Vitellius) and representatives of the Flavian dynasty, particularly Vespasian (as the man who put an end to the political chaos of the previous period), were called upon to clarify their stance on this thorny matter (memory of their predecessors), endeavouring to reconcile conflicting perspectives.

The first to confront this issue of Nero's memory was Galba. The problem facing his regime was the determination of its identity within a politically and militarily fluid framework. Both Galba and his associates were aware that the violent death of a ruler – in this case Nero – and the simultaneous seizure of power by a usurper whose claim was not based on family ties, created new challenges around the issue of memory.² Galba, as the first *princeps* whose lineage did not trace back to Octavian,³ proposed a different mode of governance during his brief reign, diverging from Nero's approach with proclamations centered around the ideals of *Res Publica* (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.16).⁴ While his idealistic

¹ Flower 2006: 280.

² Flower 2006: 198.

³ Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero came from the same family (Julio-Claudians).

⁴ *Si immensum imperii corpus stare ac librari sine rectore posset, dignus eram a quo res publica inciperet.* Galba, addressing his adopted son Piso, claimed that he himself would be the right person to establish a democratic government, if the Roman state could survive without a leader (as the imperial system of government provided), then Galba himself would be the right person to establish a democratic government. Galba's proclamations of a different kind of government,

governance, as far as it was implemented, might have been beneficial for the Roman state, it did not resonate with the Roman reality and imperatives. Galba attempted to distance himself from the *memoria Neronis* through his policies.⁵ Yet he did not explicitly pursue, at least officially, the *damnatio memoriae* of his predecessor. *Damnatio memoriae*, as the process of erasing a prominent person (especially an emperor) from public memory by removing his name and his portraits from public buildings and inscriptions, seems not to have been applied, at least officially, in the case of Nero.⁶ The situation surrounding this issue is particularly complex. The position on the non-application of *damnatio memoriae* in the case of Nero is strengthened by the fact that his portraits and busts were not destroyed by Galba, but rather stored and returned to public view by Otho. *Damnatio memoriae* was certainly imposed officially on Domitian (AD 96) and Commodus (AD 192), among others and was deliberated in relation to Caligula (AD 41) (Suetonius *Caligula*: 60),⁷ while Nero was subjected to *hostem iudicatum* (declared an enemy) by the Senate (Suetonius *Nero*: 49). However, this decision was not accompanied by any official *consultum* from the new ruler (Galba).

Galba's choice to distance himself from Nero's practices and politics is reflected in his adoption of Piso (full name: Calpurnius Piso Frugi Licinianus Lucius), whose choice was influenced by his aristocratic background (Tacitus *Histories*: 1. 14; Plutarch *Galba*: 23; Suetonius *Galba*: 17). As Galba points out, Augustus' desire to keep the imperial power in his family, through a privileging of kinship or marriage connections over merit, led to a series of bad emperors which culminated in Nero, and then a return of civil war. Galba decided, therefore, to look for an heir outside his own family, and to choose a successor based on

one more akin to the virtues of the Republican Period, remain theoretical. The little information we have about the form and nature of Galba's promised exercise of power is contained in Galba's speech announcing the adoption of young Piso.

⁵ The issue of the *memoria Neronis* concerned the public memory of Nero, as it was preserved through public space and public image (statues, busts, coins, houses - especially the *domus aurea*). With regard to the Neronian policies that Galba wanted to abandon, these were mainly related to a relationship of economic dependence between the ruler - soldiers - citizens, and to an unprecedented exposure of the emperor in public life, mainly through sporting and theatrical events (see also Galba's decision not to proceed with an extraordinary *donativum* to the soldiers on the occasion of the adoption of Piso).

⁶ Gizewski 2004a: 60-61, s.v. *Damnatio memoriae*.

⁷ Gizewski 2004a: 60-61, s.v. *Damnatio memoriae*.

merit. He tried simultaneously to position himself in the tradition of Augustus and to distance himself from Augustus' failure (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.16). Galba and Piso were the first to break the rule of hereditary succession in the matter of imperial succession, as it had been established since AD 14 with the ascent of Tiberius to power. According to O'Gorman, the rejection of the expected choice of Otho as Galba's successor and the sudden appearance of Piso give the impression that history has taken a dramatic turn away from its anticipated course.⁸ The choice to select a successor (Piso) not originating from the close circle of Galba's associates, to which Otho belonged, carried a profound ethical symbolism. It gave Galba the opportunity to present himself as a reformer prioritising collective interests over individual ones (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.15-16). However, the fact that Piso was unknown both to the military ranks and the Roman populace initially led to the dismissal of the adoption and shortly after to Piso's violent death.⁹ This development proved that the Roman reality was far from what Galba had envisioned. The issue of adoption occupied Tacitus notably, as the historian, within just a few chapters of the first book of the *Historiae*, includes three speeches: one from Galba (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.15-16),¹⁰ one from Piso (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.29-30),¹¹ and one from Otho (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.37-38).¹² Scholars argue that the inclusion of extensive speeches within the framework of historical narrative demonstrates Tacitus's emphasis on adoption. The speeches are utilised by historians with the aim of raising ethical questions and highlighting the critical nature of the respective historical moment.¹³ The present historical moment has to do with the adoption of the

⁸ O'Gorman 2006: 282.

⁹ Piso was killed on 15 January AD 69 in the praetorian camp by Otho's supporters. In fact, as described by Tacitus, Tacitus *Histories*: 1.42-43, Otho (i.e. the next emperor) showed great satisfaction at the murder of the young successor Piso. He likely saw Piso as the only real threat to his political development.

¹⁰ In this speech, Galba addressed the young Piso and announces his adoption by him. He took care to emphasise the merits of the young heir Piso, analysing the reasons for his election and attacking the previous emperor, Nero, and his policies.

¹¹ Piso's speech was addressed to the soldiers to ensure their loyalty. He identifies the threat posed by Otho's movement with the survival of the Roman state itself. He emphasised the values held by the Senate, the state and the Roman people, and places the safety of the emperor Galba at the forefront.

¹² Otho decided to address the soldiers himself in order to gain their support against Galba. This speech has strong theatrical elements. It emphasises the danger to the soldiers themselves as long as Galba remains in power and recalls the murders that took place when Galba first entered to Rome as emperor. At the same time, he attacks Galba's regime in general, accusing it of distorting values and greed.

¹³ Keitel 1991: 2772; Levene 1999: 203.

young Piso by the Emperor Galba in order to restore political stability to Rome. Moreover, the fact that all three speeches are delivered before the Praetorians shows the power and involvement of this body in political affairs during the early post-Christian century.¹⁴ The Praetorians greatly increased their power and influence at the imperial court in the first century AD. All the emperors of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and their successors were well aware that their continuance in the highest political office depended largely on the loyalty of the Praetorians.

The Aristocratic Condemnation and the Popularity of the *memoria Neronis*

The death of Nero and the violent political change of the year AD 68 were accompanied by a politically unstable period, the characteristics of which Tacitus depicts in a particularly gloomy way:¹⁵

*Opus adgredior opimum casibus, atrox proeliis, discors seditionibus,
ipsa etiam pace saevum.*

The work I am undertaking (concerns a period) full of destruction, fierce battles, fragmented by rebellions, and the same (period) (was full of) cruelty for a period of peace. (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.2, trans. Petrocheilos 2013)

According to Tacitus, Rome was facing the risk of collapse, as the political stability guaranteed by the governance of the Julio-Claudians for nearly a century had vanished. This, combined with the ambivalent reception of Nero's death among upper and lower social strata, indicates that the *memoria Neronis* would continue to be of concern to the central administration (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.4; Suetonius *Nero*: 57). In particular, the next emperors were called upon very immediately to decide whether their policy would follow that of Nero and,

¹⁴ Galba's decision to adopt Piso before the Praetorians creates a sharp contrast with his other proclamations of a return to constitutional legitimacy and respect for the Senate. Keitel 1991: 2773 insists on the importance of the audience of the three speeches, arguing that the fact that the Praetorians are chosen by all three speakers shows who really held power in Rome during this period.

¹⁵ By violent political change I refer to the premature removal of Nero from imperial office and the end of the Julio-Claudian rule which lasted for approximately one hundred years.

moreover, how his public memorial (through the *domus aurea*, statues, and works of art) should be replaced or preserved. In addition to the common populace, which expressed its disapproval for the end of Nero's rule (the Roman *plebs* were not happy with Nero's death and continued for many years to pay tribute to his tomb), the testimony of Suetonius is significant. According to Suetonius, the Parthian king, Vologesus, upon learning of Nero's death, demanded honours in his memory to renew his alliance with the Roman state (Suetonius *Nero*: 57). This mention demonstrates the high popularity of the late ruler in the eastern provinces, which was far removed from the revolutionary declarations of the western provinces, as expressed first through Vindex¹⁶ and later through Galba (Plutarch *Galba*: 4; Suetonius *Nero*: 40; Suetonius *Galba*: 10; Dio Cassius: 63.22-24).

Moreover, Tacitus focuses in particular on the difficulty with which both the Praetorians and the legions of the provinces (except for Spain and Gaul)¹⁷ finally agreed to withdraw their support from the legitimate ruler. The Praetorians did not betray Nero by personal choice, since his economic policy was particularly favourable to them, rather than due to pressure and artifice (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.5). The German troops (in Germania Superior) had not abandoned their ruler (Nero) willingly and certainly did not see in Galba a better ruler for themselves (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.8).¹⁸ As previously noted, military dissatisfaction with Galba's regime was a catalyst for Galba's downfall, as the cruelty he showed when entering Rome had been indelibly recorded in the memory of the army (Plutarch *Galba*: 15). According to the accounts of Suetonius and Plutarch, Galba, on his entry into Rome as emperor, ordered the slaughter of those who had not yet declared their allegiance to his regime and

¹⁶ Gaius Julius Vindex (AD 25-68) was a Roman governor of the province of Gallia Lugdunensis. He belonged to the party of the Agrippina the Younger, Nero's mother, but in AD 59 Vindex had taken part in a conspiracy against the emperor. In early AD 68, Vindex rebelled against Nero. Vindex declared his allegiance to Galba to gain support. Vindex clashed with the commander of Germania Superior, Verginius Rufus, and committed suicide in defeat.

¹⁷ The province of Spain was under the command of Clavius Rufus who had proved his abilities in times of peace, but not in times of war. It is probable, therefore, that this province did not wish to become involved in any dispute concerning the imperial office. Similarly, the Gallic provinces remained loyal as they had recently been granted the right of Roman citizenship which entailed a reduction in the tax they paid.

¹⁸ The troops of this province were led by Verginius Rufus who, after defeating Vindex and his troops in battle, declared immediate allegiance to Galba.

remained loyal to Nero. At the same time, the posthumous appeal of Nero to large sections of the army and the memory of Nero as a regular 'financial sponsor', combined with the austerity that Galba tried to impose, greatly influenced the way in which the soldiers perceived their relationship with the *princeps*. Nero had pursued a lavish economic policy towards the troops, which included frequent and extraordinary financial rewards (*donativum*). Soldiers should be considered among the most economically favoured groups by the Neronian policy. It was, therefore, to be expected that the contrast in the treatment of soldiers between Nero and Galba would be further exacerbated by the army's entrenched expectations of the role of the emperor.¹⁹ Galba's direct attempt to reduce this expenditure on the army, and especially the extraordinary financial rewards (*donativa*), was bound to provoke a reaction among the soldiers. The expectations of the role of emperor that the soldiers had cultivated during Nero's fourteen-year reign pertained to the role of a regular financial sponsor. Galba's policies were certainly beneficial to the Roman state and its coffers. However, it has to be assumed that exactly the same policy would not have been popular and would not have been accepted in the military ranks.

The Senate's attitude towards Nero is of particular interest, as it promptly declared him an enemy of the state while he was still alive (Suetonius *Nero*: 49; Dio Cassius: 63.27). According to Suetonius' narrative, Nero, while hiding outside the imperial palace, received a letter from the slave Phaon. In this letter, the Senate had declared him an enemy of the country, and they were seeking to punish him in the appropriate manner. The tactics used for such punishments included being struck with a stick until death (see Suetonius *Nero*: 49). The hostile attitude of the Senate towards Nero and its satisfaction with Nero's downfall are indicative of the overall aristocratic condemnation of the Neronian period. However, by declaring Nero an enemy of the fatherland, the Senate actually supported or even organised a coup against the emperor to whom they had sworn allegiance. At the same time, however, it had not recognised a potential candidate for the administration of the state.²⁰ This decision can be

¹⁹ Charles and Hedrick 2016: 160.

²⁰ Flower 2006: 198.

interpreted through a review of the relations between the ruler and this state body.

Going back to the beginning of the Neronian rule (AD 54) and specifically to Nero's first speech before the Senate, as is known from Tacitus' work, we observe that the new ruler assures the preservation of the institution's freedom and the harmonious collaboration between two fundamental political forces (*princeps – Senatus*) (Tacitus *Annals*: 13.4). This speech is particularly important for the beginning of Nero's reign, as he wanted to remove any suspicion that Claudius was poisoned. At the same time, he intended to set the tone for his future policy, in which the Senate would retain its full freedom. According to Nero, he would only take charge of the troops. Simultaneously, he rejected totalitarian practices and criticised the actions of Claudius, which had disturbed his predecessor's relations with the senators. As Tacitus affirms:

Nec defuit fides, multaque arbitrio senatus constituta sunt

And the faith (from these promises) did not vanish, and many issues were settled by the decision of the Senate (Tacitus *Annals*: 13.5, trans. Petrocheilos 2012b)

The Senate remained loyal to Nero for several years even after the assassination of his mother Agrippina (the Younger) in AD 59 despite any popular protests. Nero was able, through the letter he sent to the Senate, to communicate the assassination of his mother in such a way as to show that this heinous act was committed in response to the demands of a woman who challenged the political structure of the *principatus*, reaching even to threaten the security of the emperor himself (Tacitus *Annals*: 14.9).

Up to this point at least, the Senate and its members had not been victims of Nero's growing whims. Their relations were only disturbed in AD 65 after the Pisonian conspiracy.²¹ In addition to the suspicion and fear felt by Nero after

²¹ Osgood 2017: 35; The Pisonian Conspiracy (AD 65) was organised by Gaius Calpurnio Piso and other Roman aristocrats in response to Nero's policies, which they considered despotic. Piso wanted to replace Nero with himself and have him recognised as emperor by the Praetorian Guard. When the plot was discovered, Nero undertook a widespread purge of prominent politicians and others. Among those who were either murdered or forced to commit

the Pisonian conspiracy, another factor that contributed to the Senate's displeasure towards the emperor was his artistic pursuit. Nero's participation in sporting and theatrical events, his disguises and his presence on the theatre stage were some of the emperor's habits that influenced the Senate against him. Tacitus argues that the Senate was compelled to award Nero the prize for the best singing performance, in an attempt to mitigate the disgrace generated by his appearances on stage (Tacitus *Annals*: 16.4). On the other hand, Dion commented on the spectacles presented by Nero:

ὠλοφύροντο δὲ πάντες οἱ νοῦν ἔχοντες

All who had reason were mourned. (Dio Cassius: 62.18, trans. Cary 1925: 74)

Osgood, by emphasising the artistic concerns of the *princeps*, concludes with the following inference: 'Nero's chariot racing at the *Juvenalia* (59 AD), the *Neronia* of 60 AD, the emperor's shocking debut as a lyre-player in 64, and the Great Fire that destroyed much of Rome [led to the following]: after all this, some senators quietly might have wondered literally what would be left of their city' (original emphasis).²² Based on these contrasts between social groups, Galba and then Otho adopted two completely different approaches to *memoria Neronis*, assessing in different ways whether it would help them or create problems in consolidating their position. Galba tried to present himself as an 'anti-Nero', while Otho presented himself not only as a 'friend-Nero' but much more as a 'second Nero'.

Galba's brief initiation into power diverges significantly from both Otho and Vitellius,²³ not only due to his deliberate distancing from the memory of Nero but also because he aspired to establish a sense of continuity with the

suicide were important literary figures of the time, such as the satirist Petronius, the philosopher Seneca and the poet Lucan. According to the historical sources of the time, the Pisonian conspiracy was a turning point in Nero's reign and marked the beginning of the darkest period of his reign, see Tacitus *Annals*: 15.48-74.

²² Osgood 2017: 42.

²³ Vitellius was emperor of the Roman state from April to December AD 69 (after Otho and before Vespasian). His claim to the imperial office stemmed from his position as commander of the troops in Germania Inferior. Like Otho, Vitellius worked to restore the memory of Nero to the public sphere.

governance of his predecessors, thereby reinstating institutional legitimacy.²⁴ This continuity sought to present Nero's rule as an unfortunate parenthesis, aiming to pick up the narrative thread from where the acclaimed Claudius had left it. Galba's institutional legitimacy, the main priority of which was also the restoration of relations with the Senate, and his mindset about the way of governance are already reflected in his first moves, when he was urged by the troops to declare himself ruler (Plutarch *Galba*: 5). Galba's moderation is sharply contrasted with Otho's fierce opposition when he realised that his exclusion from the succession required immediate action. Suetonius quotes a theatrical depiction of Galba, in which he was wailing before his supporters about the state in which the *principatus* had been placed by Nero's rule (Suetonius *Galba*: 10).

However, as historical sources suggest, if Nero had so significantly offended popular sentiment through his habits and had been so thoroughly discredited in collective memory, there would not have been such continued discourse about him. A more compelling illustration of this argument is the 'Neromessiahs' (people who bore many of the outward characteristics of Nero), a term coined by Varner to describe individuals who appeared in the Roman Empire long after Nero's death.²⁵ Their external appearance and habits, as they closely resembled Nero, caused considerable disturbance (Tacitus *Histories*: 2.8; Suetonius *Nero*: 49; Dio Cassius: 64.9). Therefore Galba's decision to implement a mode of governance that bore no resemblance to the politics of Nero did not align with popular sentiment and certainly did not secure the support of the common people. His choice to distance himself from the *memoria Neronis* was also attempted through visual representation. Both Galba's portraits and the coins he circulated were characterised by a realistic artistic style – quite distinct from that adopted by Nero – aiming to evoke memories of democratic precedents, thus extending a hand of collaboration towards the aristocracy.²⁶

²⁴ Höbenreich and Rizzelli 1998: 183.

²⁵ Varner 2017: 239-240; Varner argues that the durability of the Nero myth is also demonstrated by its presence in Jewish and early Christian literature. For an analysis of the resonance of the Neronomessians, see Charles and Hedrick 2016: 145-151.

²⁶ Varner 2004: 106.

Contrary to Otho, who, upon assuming power, not only restored the *memoria Neronis* but also significantly appropriated it, Galba himself, believing that the utilisation of Nero's memory would channel popular and military support toward his persona, took direct actions in that direction. He specifically did not hinder the reinstatement of condemned busts and statues of Nero in public spaces (Suetonius *Otho*: 7).²⁷ Furthermore, by sensational decree, he reinstated the statues of Poppaea Sabina (originally the wife of Emperor Otho and later of Nero himself), as the former legitimate spouse of Nero (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.78). He also expressed his thought regarding the establishment of a public celebration in honor of Nero's memory (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.78). Another element indicating Otho's more apparent connection to Nero is his acknowledgement by the people with the name 'Otho Nero' (Plutarch *Otho*: 3; Suetonius *Otho*: 7). He himself showed no displeasure with this appellation; on the contrary, he utilised it in the signature of certain official letters and documents. These actions contribute to the notion that the dynamics of Otho's brief reign were founded on the success of assimilating the lower classes.²⁸

However, at the same time, this assimilation led to a reduction in the prospects of regaining the support of the Senate for the ruler, as Otho made no effort to reconcile the different views between the aristocracy and the common people. His primary goal was to prioritise a policy that not only aligned with the Neronian principles but also simultaneously eradicated anything associated with Galba, which he identified with frugality, harshness and idealism that were impractical in implementation. Finally, both the iconography (through portraits and busts) and Otho's monetary policy²⁹ moved in the same direction. The depictions he adopted had a dual aim: on the one hand distancing from *saevitia* (severity) and the objective naturalism,³⁰ characteristics of Galba's representations and on the other hand embracing Nero's features. In this way, Otho contrasted his young age with that of his predecessor – which was accompanied by

²⁷ According to Varner 2017: 240-241, most of Nero's portraits were not destroyed but stored in safe places during the riots of AD 68-69.

²⁸ Roche 2008: 113.

²⁹ Roche 2008: 113.

³⁰ Roche 2008: 113 uses the term 'verism'.

childlessness – and at the same time brought back into public view features of Nero that remained popular in the collective memory of the common people.

Galba and the connection with *Res Publica*

Galba's cursus honorum

Tacitus, after describing Otho's coup and the murders of Galba and Piso, condenses the biographical details of Galba, emphasising that he died at the age of seventy-three, having witnessed five emperors govern the Roman state (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.49). Galba was indeed the best ruler, born in the late 1st century BC, and had experienced the entirety of the Julio-Claudian dynasty from various administrative positions. These positions ensured his personal contact with each reigning emperor and a close relationship with the imperial court. Galba's proximity to the imperial family extended to his personal relationship with Livia (the wife of Octavian Augustus). Given that his family-owned estates in the Tarraconensis region (from where Livia also came), Livia supported him in the early years of his career.³¹

The first reference (based on the course of his life) to the public presence of Galba is made by Dio, when Galba wore the *toga virilis* in the year AD 14 (Dio Cassius: 56.29).³² He is then mentioned in the context of the year AD 33 (during Tiberius' reign), when he served as *consul* with Leucius Sulla (L. Sulla) (Tacitus *Annals*: 6.15; Dio Cassius: 58.20). At the time of Galba's subordination, he used the *praenomen* Lucius/Leucius (Lucius) and reverted to Servius when Galba became *princeps* (Suetonius *Galba*: 4). One incident which is given by all the sources examined (Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio, Plutarch) is Tiberius' prophecy to Galba concerning the latter's ascension to the highest office (Tacitus *Annals*: 6.20; Suetonius *Galba*: 4, Dio Cassius: 64.1). When Tiberius had finally retired to Capri, he summoned Galba there, and, after testing him by a series of conversations, Tiberius told him that he too would one day taste the imperial

³¹ Eck 2004b: 652, s.v. *Galba* 2; Galba himself later served as prefect of this province.

³² In ancient Rome the *toga virilis* assumed by a youth at the age of 14 as a symbol of manhood and citizenship.

power (*'et tu, Galba, quandoque degustabis imperium'*) (Tacitus *Annals*: 6.20).³³ Caligula subsequently appointed him governor of the province of Upper Germania (Suetonius *Galba*: 6), and because, of his moderation after Caligula's death, at a time when many urged him to take advantage of the political situation, he won the deep esteem of Claudius, who included him in his circle of close associates (Suetonius *Galba*: 7). During the reign of Claudius in the year AD 41, Galba conquered the *Chatti*, while Publius Gabinius, a close associate of Galba, triumphed over the *Chausi* and reclaimed the last military eagle that had remained in the hands of the enemy since the destruction of Varus (Dio Cassius: 60.8). Subsequently, Galba held various administrative and honorary positions, including the governorship (as *proconsul*) of Africa, his inclusion in the priesthood of Augustus (*sodales Augustales*) and an eight-year administration of the province of Tarraconensis in Spain (Suetonius *Galba*: 7-8).³⁴

Despite his close ties to the imperial court and his position among the highest echelons of the state machinery, Galba did not find himself in Nero's crosshairs during the mass persecutions unleashed by the latter after the Pisonian conspiracy.³⁵ Galba chose discretion (Suetonius *Galba*: 8), opting not to provoke Nero's jealousy, while simultaneously adopting a moderate stance toward the artistic excesses of the emperor, thereby managing to become particularly well-liked (Plutarch *Galba*: 4). When Galba eventually assumed the position of *princeps*, his advanced age and the lack of a clear successor quickly created an atmosphere of doubt regarding the smooth and uninterrupted continuation of state administration. The designation of a successor was an urgent matter that needed prompt resolution to curtail any potential claims from aspiring candidates. However, Galba did not address this issue for at least six months after assuming the reins of governance (January AD 69). According to

³³ *Degustabis* is an ambiguous word and a clever delphic verb: it means 'taste', but in the sense of 'to take a taste, a little bit'. Tiberius prophesies that yes, Galba will rule, but his reign will be short. That is, he will merely get a taste of power, he will not enjoy it, and he will not get his fill of it.

³⁴ For more information on the *Sodales Augustales* association, see Sehlmeier 2008: 603-604, s.v. *Sodales*.

³⁵ After the revelation of the Pisonian conspiracy, Nero undertook a widespread persecution of prominent people and aristocrats. His aim was to eliminate any future threat and thus strengthen his position in the monarchy by eliminating potential political rivals.

Morgan, Galba's reluctance to engage in securing a successor was politically astute as it limited intrigues surrounding the chosen individual. However, it was also poorly calculated since he took no action to mitigate rumours surrounding the potential successor.³⁶ Morgan's position is also reflected in the growing hopes that Otho harboured about his own use of him in the succession. The reversal of expectations led to the tragic events of 15 January AD 69, as will be shown below.

The selection of Piso as a successor

The events in the province of Germania Inferior and the elevation of Vitellius as the leader by the legions stationed there, precipitated swift developments in the matter of choosing a successor (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.14; Plutarch *Galba*: 19; Suetonius *Galba*: 16; Dio Cassius: 63.4-5).³⁷ In particular, Galba was informed of the revolution of the German troops (in Germania Inferior) who had already chosen Vitellius as their leader. Galba then convened an imperial council, composed of his closest associates, to settle the question of succession.

The end of Julio-Claudian rule, which was based on hereditary succession, automatically raised concerns about how the imperial system could be modified to remain viable.³⁸ To settle the issue the preferred solution was the practice of adoption (*adoptio*). Adoption was the only means that Galba had at his disposal for obtaining a successor,³⁹ which is why he defended it vigorously in his speech before the Praetorians (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.16).⁴⁰ A basic distinction, which must be made, is the difference between the terms '*adoptio*' (which is also used by Tacitus) and the term '*adrogatio*'. According to Berger, when the adopted person was previously under the *patria potestas* of another, the act was called '*adoptio*', whereas when the individual was not under a paternal authority it was

³⁶ Morgan 2006: 57.

³⁷ According to Murison 1993: 63, Galba's age and childless life did not affect the revolt in Germania Inferior. This was mainly fueled by Galba's habit of harshly punishing enemies (i.e. former German legion commanders) and overly favoring his friends.

³⁸ Lindsay 2009: 203.

³⁹ When Galba became emperor, he was already quite old (73 years old) and had no natural descendants to succeed him (both of his natural children had died very young).

⁴⁰ Galba chose to make this speech in front of a military audience, in keeping with the tradition of announcing an adoption in public to make it official. Furthermore, by choosing the camp to announce the adoption, Galba acknowledges the importance of the Praetorians' loyalty to him and his position.

referred as '*adrogatio*'.⁴¹ However, it was not mandatory for someone without a father, seeking adoption, to strictly adhere to *adrogatio*. They could opt for adoption (*adoptio*) instead. In *adrogatio*, not only does the adoptee become part of the *ius familiae* of their new family, but also those dependent on them. In *adoptio*, only the individual himself is incorporated. Through *adoptio*, Galba adopts only his successor, not his entire family. Therefore, his aim was not to establish a potential new dynasty but to secure the best possible successor. Deissmann-Merten, relying on legal texts such as the *Institutiones* (*Gaius Institutiones*: 97-107) and *Digesta* (*Digesta*: 1.7.1-46), asserts that *adrogatio* (or *arrogation*) indeed constituted the adoption of an individual not under the *patria potestas*, simultaneously representing the earlier form of *adoptio*.⁴²

In his first words to Piso, Galba stated that he was adopting him not as a private citizen, but as a future ruler. Moreover, taking into account the fact that Piso's father had been murdered several years earlier (and therefore, Piso was not in *patria potestas* at the time of his adoption), we conclude that the correct term for Piso's adoption is *adrogatio*. Tacitus's use of the term *adoptio* is therefore most likely to describe the act that took place in the imperial palace, the approval of which was later sought by the Praetorians and the Senate.⁴³ The actual adoption of Piso took place in what Tacitus refers to as the *comitia imperii* (imperial council), the meeting that took place within the imperial house in the presence of Galba and his close associates (*Tacitus Histories*: 1.14).⁴⁴ Conflicting opinions had been expressed on the question of the successor, especially on the person of Otho, who was presented as the most popular choice. Otho's candidacy seemed to be the most favored, since the latter had strongly supported Galba's movement and was supported by Galba's close associate Titus Vinius. Vinius looked forward to his daughter's marriage to Otho if the latter was chosen as Galba's successor (*Tacitus Histories*: 1.13; *Plutarch Galba*: 21). Opposed to this choice were the other two close associates of the

⁴¹ Berger 2016 s.v. *adoption*; On *adrogatio* as an earlier form of adoption, see Deissmann-Merten 2002: 147-151, s.v. *adoptio*. The distinction between the terms (*adoptio*, *adrogatio*) is important as the historical sources are careful to use the appropriate term depending on the context of the adoption.

⁴² Deissmann-Merten 2002: 147-151, s.v. *adoptio*.

⁴³ Höbenreich and Rizzelli 1998: 192.

⁴⁴ On the function and significance of the *comitia imperii*, see Höbenreich and Rizzelli 1998: 192; Levene 2009: 216.

princeps, Lacon and Icelus, primarily due to the hostility they harboured towards Vinius (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.13). Another candidate was Cornelius Dolabella, who, however, passes fleetingly through Tacitus's narrative lens and does not meet Galba's criteria for a successor.⁴⁵

Rejecting both aforementioned options, Galba decided to adopt the young Calpurnius Piso Licinianus.⁴⁶ This choice is positively assessed by ancient writers, who view Piso as evidence of Galba's genuine concern for the common good of the Roman state (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.13; Plutarch *Galba*: 21).⁴⁷ As Plutarch notes, Galba did not choose the most pleasant (τὸν ἡδίστον) but the most beneficial (τὸν ὠφελιμώτατον) for the Romans (Plutarch *Galba*: 21). What turned Galba towards this choice was the aristocratic lineage of the young successor and his descent from individuals who played leading roles in the events of the Late Republican Period. His father was Marcus Licinius Crassus (full name: Marcus Licinius Crassus Frugi) and his mother was Scribonia, both of whom traced their lineage to Pompey and Marcus Crassus (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.15; Plutarch *Galba*: 23).⁴⁸ It is likely that Galba knew Piso's family, as he himself served as consul in AD 33 and Piso's father served in the same office in AD 27. The proximity in time to the service of this office therefore support the thesis of the proximity of the two sides.⁴⁹

Piso is portrayed as a proponent of the moral values of the republican state and his appearance, and manners reflect his strict ethical principles (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.14; Plutarch *Galba*: 23). Born in AD 38, he had not assumed any

⁴⁵ For K. Dolabella, see Tacitus *Histories*: 1.88, 2.64-64; Plutarch *Galba*: 23; Suetonius *Galba*: 12; and PIR2 C1347.

⁴⁶ The adoption of Piso is further confirmed by a preserved inscription related to the actions of the *Fratres Arvales* (CIL VI 2051), as referenced in Eck 2003: 1002, under the entry for Calpurnius II 24. The choice of the young Piso as successor was supported mainly by Galba's close associate Lacon. It is certain that Piso's aristocratic status and his family's ties to the Julio-Claudian family played an important role in his choice (one of Piso's brothers, Pompeius Magnus, had married Claudius' daughter Antonia). But then both Piso's brother and his parents were murdered in AD 46). Tacitus does, however, leave evidence of an earlier acquaintance between Laco and Piso.

⁴⁷ A complete picture of Galba as a 'constitutional legalist' is given by Murison 1993: 31-44.

⁴⁸ The thought of adopting Piso indicates Galba's desire to maintain dominance at the highest levels of the administration, and in particular in the hands of those families who had prided themselves on their ancestry since the Republican period, see Lindsay 2009: 204.

⁴⁹ Murison 1993 : 66.

public office due to his prolonged exile⁵⁰ up until the moment of his adoption. In contrast, his father held the position of praetor (*praetor urbanus*) in AD 24, consul (*consul ordinarius*) in AD 27 and was twice honoured by Claudius with triumphal insignia (*ornamenta triumphalia*) for his actions in Mauretania and in Spain.⁵¹ Later on, however, his family fell into disgrace due to the machinations of Messalina,⁵² resulting in the assassination of both his parents and one of Piso's brothers.⁵³ Throughout the entirety of Nero's reign, Piso remained in exile, a circumstance that undoubtedly influenced Galba's judgement in his choice. Perhaps he believed that the experience of exile would deter Piso from abusive rule.⁵⁴ Moreover, due to his exile, Piso was an unknown entity, a political *tabula rasa* upon which Galba could inscribe his own narrative for the young successor. At the same time, the fact that he was classified among the victims and not among Nero's friends reinforced Galba's attempt to present his government as the exact opposite of his predecessor's practices and constant persecution.

Finally, Galba decided to announce the adoption of Piso within the Praetorian camp. This decision raises questions and creates contradictions, as up to that moment, his actions indicated that he did not classify the troops among the regulatory factors of the state. On the one hand, he made efforts to limit the lawlessness of the soldiers, especially the Praetorians, and for this reason he did not grant the promised *donativa* from Nymphidius Sabinus. However, he did not choose the Senate to announce the adoption, as his institutional legitimacy would dictate, which he constantly promoted as the crown jewel of his politics. The discussion regarding where the adoption should be announced reveals a hesitation among the higher echelons of the administration and Galba's close advisors about how the adoption could be publicly disclosed and politically

⁵⁰ Eck 2003: 1002, s.v. Calpurnius II 24. For his long exile, Tacitus *Histories*: 1.14, *longo exilio*, neither the cause, nor the place nor the duration is known, see Damon 2003: 135.

⁵¹ Eck 2005: 538, s.v. Licinius II 9.

⁵² It is well known that Messalina, as the wife of the emperor Claudius, used the influence of her position to carry out a series of political persecutions. These persecutions were directed against aristocratic families who, in her opinion, threatened Claudius' political position and her own and her children's development. One of the families at the centre of her persecution was that of Piso.

⁵³ Eck 2005: 538, s.v. Licinius II 9. A detailed biography of the family of Piso is also given by Murison 1993: 64-66.

⁵⁴ Morgan 2006: 60.

communicated.⁵⁵ The choice of the military camp may have been appropriate to honor the soldiers but the rhetoric employed did not correspond to any concerted effort to connect with the troops.⁵⁶ The adoption, a crucial event for the continuity of governance, was not accompanied by even a small donation to the soldiers, which could have symbolised appreciation for their service. As Tacitus acknowledges, a small gratuity would have been sufficient to ensure the soldiers' loyalty (Tacitus *Histories*: 1.18). The choice of the military camp prevailed, especially since Galba himself was aware of the military discontent that had arisen against him due to his strict economic policies. This discontent combined with the defection of the legions in Upper Germania demanded immediate action. The implementation of decisions had to make it clear that Galba sought harmony with the soldiers relying on their support. However, at the same time, he implicitly declared that he was not willing to return to Nero's policies, regardless of any pressure in that direction.⁵⁷

Conclusions

I have analysed the issues of *memoria*, the reception of Nero's death, and the political ideology of Galba's regime. This is a significant paradox that can provide us with clear direction on how we ultimately approach the Neronian reign through ancient sources in the differentiation of various social groups regarding the reception of Nero's death. The Senate and the aristocracy expressed particular satisfaction with the end of the Neronian era, however, did not propose a new figure who could manage the precarious political situation. In contrast, the *plebs* and large segments of the army showed their sadness for the political change, each for different reasons. Nero had established himself in the collective consciousness of the army as a regular financial supporter, a choice that, while damaging to the state and the emperor-army relationship, certainly made him popular among the military ranks. Similarly, the populace continued to adorn and honor the tomb of the deceased emperor for quite some

⁵⁵ Lindsay 2009: 205.

⁵⁶ Levene 2009: 218.

⁵⁷ Murison (1993: 64) argues that Galba perceived adoption as a means to demonstrate to the legions of Germania that he was the arbiter of affairs in Rome. However, this conviction reveals his lack of understanding of the true power of the military forces. Moreover, the fact that the provincial legions had not marched against Rome for over a century may have reinforced this belief.

time after his death. This fact, combined with the unrest and popularity sparked by various 'Neromessiahs' that emerged several years after Nero's death proves that the Julio-Claudian emperor enjoyed a considerable degree of popularity among the common people. These contradictions lead to approaching Nero as an emperor-victim of the aristocracy. His tense relations with the upper social strata systematically undermined his position and led to his downfall.

When Galba finally assumed power, he overtly attempted to distance himself from the *memoria Neronis*, a choice that ultimately proved politically fruitless. He proposed an idealistic mode of governance that, as demonstrated, did not correspond to reality and did not garner social approval. The pinnacle of this idealistic governance model was the adoption of the young aristocrat Piso, who was kin to Crassus and Pompey. This adoption was presented as the best possible solution for the common good and the continuity of the state, a fact recognised by ancient writers. Furthermore, it was accompanied by announcements of a desire to return to a governance system akin to that of the republican period. However, the poorly executed public relations of the adoption (the absence of an extraordinary financial reward for this significant public event) and Piso's unpopularity among the soldiers provided Otho with the perfect pretext to rebel and, indeed, secure broad military support. Otho's actions, even before he assumed power, showed that he was truly a man of his time and had a good grasp of the central political scene in Rome. In this direction, when he took over the administration of the state after Galba's death, because he was aware of the continued popular appeal of the *memoria Neronis*, he reintroduced busts, portraits, and the memory of Nero into the public sphere and adopted various of Nero's political practices. However, this initial enthusiasm was not enough for him to secure a lasting and peaceful reign.

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