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«NERO AT THE ACTIAN GAMES»: A DIFFERENT VIEW*

Brooks Emmons Levy

In SM 34 (1984), p. 81–85, Andrew Burnett has published two notes on the coinage of Nero, in which he rather cryptically refers to our «debate and disagreement» (a friendly one). I take this opportunity to present my own view, first offered in a paper given at the Nickle Conference on Numismatics and the Ancient World (Calgary, 1981). My disagreement is not with Burnett's treatment of Nero's «Juppiter Liberator» gold, which seems to have laid to rest the debate about the authenticity of the British Museum aureus, if not the possibility that an authentic issue lies behind it (Mezabarba in 1683 knew of a Neronian denarius with this type)¹. What seems to me less probable is the thesis of Burnett's second note: that Nero's rare «Apollonia» coinage, which has no mintmark, should be considered a civic issue of Actian Nicopolis. The series is best known from two varieties (Nero-as-Apollo/Victory, Nero-as-Apollo/Liberty) published as BMC Illyria, nos. 84–85; examples of a third variety (portrait of Nero/Victory: Fig. 1) exist in the American Numismatic Society and other collections². It is clear, of course, that the coinage is not from Apollonia. This was pointed out over two decades ago by Hasan Ceka³, and a further argument could be added to Ceka's: Apollonia in Epirus⁴ had no particular reason to celebrate Nero's liberation of Achaëa, to which the Liberty figure of BMC 85 surely alludes⁵. As Eckhel already suspected, the series must have been minted in the province of Achaëa itself⁶. Now, at first glance the reverse type shared by «Apollonia» with a Neronian issue from Nicopolis – Victory facing, with the simple legend ΝΕΡΩΝΟΣ – might suggest the attribution of the anonymous «Apollonia» series to the latter city, which Nero visited and whose games he attended. Persuasive too is Burnett's observation of a die used in common: BMC 84 shares its reverse die with a Nicopolitan piece. But there are serious difficulties. The most obvious is the lack of mintmark in the «Apollonia» series: since Nero's other coins from Nicopolis have it («Nerononicopolis»), why is it missing from the

* My thanks go to the following institutions and their curators for the materials used here as illustration, as well as to those providing materials for study: New York, American Numismatic Society (Figs. 1, 2); London, British Museum (Fig. 3); Vienna, Bundessammlung von Medaillen, Münzen und Geldzeichen (Fig. 4). For photographs I thank Robert Levy.

¹ A. Banti and L. Simonetti, *Corpus Nummorum Romanorum XVII* (1978), p. 69, no. 348.

² Milan, Oxford, Paris. There is a good photograph of the American Numismatic Society's piece in the R. Ball auction catalogue for 1931, pl. 20, no. 670; for a photograph of an unidentified example, see RIN 1897, pl. V, no. 2. Only three pieces in the series have been properly published: those in the BMC, and a piece in Tübingen with the types of BMC 84 (SNG Tübingen 1328). Eighteen examples in all are known to me, including a Vienna piece with a wholly new obverse type, cited later in this article. Others are surely lying undiscovered, and I would be grateful to learn of them; each new piece in this very varied group can contribute important information.

³ H. Ceka, *Questions de numismatique illyrienne* (1967; French tr., 1972), p. 106. Ceka noted that genuine issues of Apollonia always bear the ethnic ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝΙΑΤΑΝ.

⁴ On the creation of Epirus as a border province under Nero, see P. Horovits, *Le principe de création des provinces procuratoriennes*, *Rev. phil.* LXV (1939), p. 228–231.

⁵ Maurice Holleaux believed that this event was widely commemorated on coinage: BCH XII (1888), p. 526 = *Etudes d'épigraphie et d'histoire grecques I* (1938), p. 183. But a supposed issue of Magnesia ad Sipylum has long been reattributed to Sicyon, and that from Lydian Dioshiron has been shown to be misinterpreted: J. Fisher, *Hesperia* XLIX (1980), p. 7, n. 19.

⁶ *Doctrina Numorum Veterum VI*; ed. 2 (1828), 276.

«Apollonia» pieces? Civic issues could certainly omit the mark on fractions, but these are not fractions⁷. Or civic mints might, for reasons as yet unclear, issue an unmarked series⁸ – but not, it seems, simultaneously with a marked one, which would be the case here. What I proposed in 1981, and still believe, is that these anonymous pieces represent a special cooperative issue by a federation of cities or peoples in the province of Achaëa⁹. The types of Nero-as-Apollo and Victory are appropriate not only to Nicopolis (as Burnett observes of the Victory type), but to any and all of the cities in whose games Nero took part. Burnett supposes that the obverse legend used throughout the series, ΝΕΡΩΝΙ ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝΙ ΚΤΙΣΤΗ, is to be explained by a Neronian «refoundation» of Nicopolis. But the common honorific κτίστης, «founder», could just as well refer to Nero's reestablishment of Hellenic independence, and could be generally applied to him by the Greeks of Achaëa. The remarkable reverse legend of BMC 85, which calls Nero the «public patron of Greece», ΔΗΜΟCΙΩ ΠΑΤΡΩΝΙ ΕΛΛΑΔΟC, suggests that this is the correct solution. And there are other indications of collaborative issue: the many variations in detail from one example to the next, or even within a single example – variations in the size and form of letters, in orthography, legend-placement, and iconography. Even in the few examples cited by Burnett some of these variants can be seen: Σ or C, Ω or ω.

Varying letter-forms alone do not, of course, constitute sufficient reason to argue that the issue was a joint one¹⁰. More telling are the iconographic variants. The Victory reverse used here belongs to a tradition most familiar from Alexander's gold: the goddess stands facing, her head turned leftward; a wreath is held in her outstretched right hand, and another attribute, usually a stylis, in her left; the royal name is vertically written beside her. For the «Apollonia» series, as for Nicopolis, this version may have been chosen in memory of its use by an earlier Roman liberator, Flamininus: on his rare gold staters struck in Greece, the Victory's second attribute is a palm-branch, and with her right hand she crowns the name T. QVINCTI. Just so at «Apollonia» the Victory crowns Nero's name, which on most examples is disposed rather awkwardly to left and right (ΝΕΡΩ-ΝΟΣ or ΝΕΡΩ-ΝΟ[C], ↑ ↑ or ↑ ↓) to avoid its bisection by her outstretched right arm. But one of the two pieces in the American Numismatic Society (Fig. 2) follows a quite different iconographic tradition, that of Nero's Western «Victoria Augusti» bronze: the goddess, with wreath and palm, steps firmly leftward, her garment fluttering out at the lower right; her right arm is extended toward, but not over, the legend, which is not ΝΕΡΩ-ΝΟΣ but (in a Greek rendering of the Latin original) ΝΕΡΩΝΟΣ-ΝΙΚΗ¹¹. If we suppose that more than one atelier was involved in producing dies for the «Apollonia» series, the choice of a different model here is easier to understand.

⁷ Weights of the eighteen «Apollonia» pieces known to me range from 8.88 to 13.17 g; Nero's Nicopolis issues: 7.45 to 10.47 g.

⁸ At Chalcis: O. Picard, *Chalcis et la confédérations eubéenne* (1979), p. 42.

⁹ On anonymous issues perhaps struck by confederations as «monnaie de panégyrie» («Festmünzen») see: L. Robert, *Monnaies antiques en Troade* (1966), p. 46; H. Seyrig, «Un tétradrachme énigmatique», *Monnaies hellénistiques* 21, RN 1971, p. 24–25; G. Le Rider, «Un tétradrachme d'Athéna Niképhoros», RN 1973, p. 75–77.

¹⁰ In fact C. Kraay, NC 1976, p. 242, has pointed out these combinations on the mintmarked issues of Nicopolis under Nero. But cf. his «Notes on the Early Imperial Tetradrachms of Syria», RN 1965, p. 60.

¹¹ It should be noted that this ANS piece shares an obverse die with two examples (Oxford, Paris) having the standard facing-Victory reverse. In three other pieces with the facing-Victory reverse (Berlin, Milan, Paris), the position of the reverse legend seems influenced by a Western «Victoria Augusti» model: it is not written vertically, but follows the curve of the flan.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Another iconographic variation is even more striking. Of fifteen «Apollonia» pieces with the standard facing-Victory reverse, seven (including BMC 84, the piece which shares its reverse die with Nicopolis) show the Victory without a palm-branch (Fig. 3). The remaining eight have the palm (Fig. 1)¹². Now at Nicopolis the facing-Victory type had been used before Nero. Under the city's first founder, the «liberator» Augustus, it appears as the reverse type of a sizable issue, with Augustus' portrait on the obverse¹³. *On all known examples the palm is lacking*; the Victory holds only a wreath. Nicopolis' omission of the second attribute from a common iconographic type is unusual enough to appear deliberate. Possibly her version reproduces part of a local monument, the elaborate trophy raised by the future Augustus at Actium-Nicopolis after the battle¹⁴. In any case the altered convention – Victory without the palm – is still in force on Nero's one certifiable Nicopolitan piece with facing-Victory reverse (the shared die), and on the facing-Victory type as it reappears there under Trajan¹⁵. Therefore, the seven «Apollonia» pieces in which the facing Victory holds no palm may, indeed, have been produced at Nicopolis, or their reverse dies contributed by her, for a joint issue. But it seems likely that the other Victory dies were made elsewhere.

Finally, an eighteenth piece, unpublished and apparently unique, should be added to the series as we now know it (Fig. 4)¹⁶. It uses the reverse legend and type (though not the die)¹⁷ of BMC 85: Liberty holding a pileus; ΝΕ[ΡΩΝΙ ΔΗΜΟΣΙΩ?] ΠΑΤΡΩΝΙ ΕΛΛΑΔΟ[Σ]. This is a sufficient indication that it belongs with the «Apollonia» group. But the obverse type is new. Nero, togate, with his right arm outstretched, stands left on a podium, which is situated rather clumsily in a distyle aedicula. The whole composition is clearly adapted from Nero's Western «Adlocutio» bronzes; like the Piso-Cleaner issue from Corinth (BMC 568–569) it represents Nero announcing the liberation of Achaëa. Its legend, only partly preserved, should probably be read ΝΕΡΩΝΙ ΠΑΤΡΩΝΙ¹⁸. Eckhel knew of the issue, but wrongly rendered the reverse as ΝΕΡΩΝΙ ΠΑΤΡΕΩΝ, and attributed it to a non-existent Greek series at the Roman colony of Patrae¹⁹. This piece, with its iterated theme of Nero as the «public patron of Hellas», reinforces the likelihood that the whole series was issued not by one mint alone, but by a consortium. Leagues could, after all, cooperate in the dedication of honorific inscriptions or statues – even in the dedication of multiple copies at a number of major sanctuaries²⁰. Though there seems to be no explicit evidence that coinage was deployed in this way, the «Apollonia» series could well have been produced for one or more of the

¹² Without palm: examples in Berlin, London, Milan, Paris (two), Rome, Tübingen; the obverse is always Nero-as-Apollo. With palm: Berlin (two), Milan (two), New York, Oxford, Paris (two); both Nero-as-Apollo and Nero's portrait appear as obverses.

¹³ M. Karamesini-Oikonomidou, *Η Νομισματοκοπία της Νικοπόλεως*, (1975), p. 68–70, nos. 1–40; a forty-first example is in the Princeton University Library collection.

¹⁴ G. Charles-Picard, *Les trophées romains* (1957), p. 253–272; note especially the reconstruction of the «Actian» trophy at St-Bertrand de Comminges, facing p. 272.

¹⁵ Oikonomidou, p. 77, no. 5 (Nero); p. 80, no. 22 (Trajan). The Victories with palm on the Trajanic nos. 23–24, and those on the «autonomous» nos. 62–63 (surely later than the first century A.D.), belong to a different iconographic tradition.

¹⁶ Vienna 13,843: 23 mm, 9.88 g, (3); ex-Tiepolo collection.

¹⁷ The lettering used on the Vienna obverse is much larger than that of BMC 85; it is hard to believe that the legend appeared complete on the former. Note the use of Ω [and Σ] in the Vienna piece, of ω and C in BMC 85.

¹⁸ The use of the same epithet, «patron», on both faces of the coin is an unusual feature, but not unparalleled; see M. Kaiser-Raiss, «Posthumous Hadrianic Medallions?», *ANS MN* 26 (1981), p. 192–193, for redundant legends on special issues at Rome.

¹⁹ L.c. II, p. 256.

²⁰ See, e.g., IG VII.2711 (the Panachaeans for Caligula); I.v.Ol.57 (the Achaean League for Hadrian).

Panhellenic sanctuaries at which games were held during Nero's visit. For Argos, Delphi, and Olympia apparently produced no coins in Nero's name, though their games were commemorated on the Neronian issues of Alexandria²¹.

What are the possible issuing authorities for the series? Beside the smaller mainland leagues which we know continued their existence in the imperial period, at least three larger leagues functioned in Nero's day in the province of Achaea: an augmented Achaean League²², the Pylaeo-Delphic Amphictiony, and the Panhellenic League²³. There is some evidence for Nero's reorganization of all three groups, part of it surely occurring in connection with his liberation of Achaea²⁴; therefore an issue of coinage in his honor by one or more of them is plausible²⁵. And since Nicopolis was a prominent member of the Amphictiony as reorganized by Augustus, it is quite understandable that she should have contributed dies to such an issue. Her *civic* coinage under Nero, without the accretions proposed by Burnett, forms a neat two-reverse series comparable to the two-reverse issue struck at Sicyon after the liberation of Achaea²⁶, or the contemporary two-reverse issue of Piso-Cleander at Corinth²⁷.

Why the «Apollonia» series should have been produced without a mintmark is unclear; in that respect, however, it has a forerunner in the gold staters of Flamininus²⁸. More research must be done and more specimens collected before a final answer can be given. But if the hypothesis offered here is correct (i.e., that the «Apollonia» issue is a joint one), what Andrew Burnett has observed is a rare and interesting example of die-sharing on the Greek mainland.

²¹ J. Vogt, *Die alexandrinischen Münzen* (1924), I, p. 35; II, p. 11.

²² U. Kahrstedt, «Das Koinon der Achäer», *Symbolae Osloenses* XXVIII (1950), p. 70.

²³ O. Picard, *Chalcis* (see n. 7 above), p. 297, n. 3; J.H. Oliver, «Panachaeans and Panhellenes», *Hesperia* XLVII (1978), p. 185-188.

²⁴ The Achaean League: «Jupiter Liberator at Patrae and the Boy Zeus of Aigion», forthcoming in *Acts of the XIIth International Congress of Classical Archaeology* (Athens, 1983). The Amphictiony: A. Plassart, *Fouilles de Delphes* III.4 (1970), p. 77. The Panhellenes: P. Cavvadias, *Fouilles d'Epidaure I* (1891), p. 67, no. 203 (= IG IV². 80-81, SIG³ 796). Seen by Fraenkel, Oliver and others as evidence for reorganization under Tiberius or Caligula, this inscription is surely (as its first editor perceived) Neronian: see A. Momigliano, *Journal of Roman Studies* 34 (1944), p. 115-116.

²⁵ For honors voted jointly by the Achaean League and the Amphictiony, see CIG 1718 (= SIG³ 846).

²⁶ J. Fisher, *Hesperia* XLIX (1980), p. 6-9.

²⁷ BMC Corinth 567-571.

²⁸ Cf. the speculations of A.A. Boyce, «The Gold Staters of Flamininus in History», *Homages A. Grenier* (1962), p. 342.