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THE *PUBLICA FAMES* OF A.D. 68 (SUETONIUS, *NERO* 45.1)

In his account of Nero's last months Suetonius describes the various ways in which the emperor, after he heard the news that Galba had decided to take on the leadership of Vindex' revolt, tried to raise troops and to extract money from the inhabitants of Rome. On top of all this, so says the biographer, Nero incurred *invidia* by profiteering from the high price of grain, and this *invidia* grew greater because it happened too that while the inhabitants were suffering from hunger, news came that a grain ship from Alexandria had arrived carrying nothing but sand for the court wrestlers (*Nero* 45.1: 'ex annonae quoque caritate lucranti adcrevit invidia; nam et forte accidit, ut in publica fame Alexandrina navis nuntiaretur pulverem luctatoribus aulicis advexisse').[1] Although this episode undoubtedly belongs in 68, there is little to be said for the argument, now generally accepted, that this shortage of grain was caused by L. Clodius Macer, legionary legate of Africa Proconsularis.[2] As I hope to show, the dearth resulted from Nero's own attempts at self-defence.

The tale of the ship throws an interesting light on the people's readiness to seize on any item, factual or not, tending to strengthen their belief that Nero was capable of the most outrageous behaviour. Nonetheless, our concern here is narrower, in the first instance at any rate: namely to fix the date of the outcry in Rome. As there is nothing to justify the idea that the announcement (*nuntiaretur*) was false,[3] it matters little that Suetonius is reporting only the effect of talk. The biographer is concerned with the reactions of people in Rome, and they can have learnt of the ship's arrival only through some form of hearsay, since the vessel itself would have docked in Puteoli.[4] What it is important to recognize is that, for the tale to have had the kind of impact Suetonius ascribes to it, the ship cannot have sailed from Alexandria at the start of the sailing season for 68 and have reached Italy at the normal time (late May or, more often, June), the sole basis for the claim that this incident 'clearly belongs to a time in the late spring/early summer of A.D. 68'.[5] Grain ships from Egypt normally travelled as

[1] Since Suetonius' expression is condensed, the linkage between the two clauses may not be immediately apparent from a literal translation: Nero incurred *invidia* by profiteering in grain also (*quoque*, i.e. in addition to the actions described in chapter 44), and this grew (*adcrevit*) because (*nam*) it happened that the announcement of the ship's arrival also (*et*) occurred at this time. So, though loading the ship with wrestling sand was never part of Nero's plan to profiteer, it was so taken by the people. Pliny, *N.H.* 35.167–8 mentions the importation of such sand by Nero's freedman Patrobius, while its use is elucidated by O. W. Reinmuth, *Phoenix* 21 (1967), 191–5.

[2] The case is argued in detail by K. R. Bradley, 'A *publica fames* in A.D. 68', *AJPh* 93 (1972), 451–8. See also B. H. Warmington, *Nero: Reality and Legend* (New York, 1969), 57; B. Gallotta, *RIL* 109 (1975), 28ff., esp. 38; K. Wellesley, *The Long Year: A.D. 69* (London, 1975), 6 and 219, n. 5; L. Bessone, *RSA* 9 (1979), 45ff.; M. T. Griffin, *Nero: the End of a Dynasty* (New Haven, CT and London, 1985), 109, 181.

[3] Witness the phrasing Suetonius uses in his report of the tale that Caesar promised his troops equestrian status (*Jul.* 33: 'quod accidit opinione falsa', etc.). Not that it would affect my argument if the annoucement were false. Even if the ship never existed, we would still have to determine the time of year at which the fabrication would have had its fullest effect, and that would have coincided with the date at which such a ship could dock in reality.

[4] R. Meiggs, *Roman Ostia*[2] (Oxford, 1973), 50, 56–7.

[5] So Bradley (n. 2), 452. For the normal date of the Alexandrian fleet's arrival see L. Casson,

a fleet.[6] Not all of them would have made port on the same day, but they would have arrived within a relatively short period. Even if the very first ship to dock was loaded with wrestling sand, therefore, the inhabitants of Rome would have known that the other ships were not far behind. And since each of them carried massive quantities of grain, grain that would inevitably have been made available very shortly (the story takes it for granted, after all, that if the ship had been carrying its standard cargo, some or all of the grain would have found its way onto the market and so have eased the shortage),[7] the people's reaction ought not to have been nearly as strong, no matter how objectionable or bizarre they found the emperor's conduct.

It could be maintained that the biographer is telling us only that the people were irritated, exasperated, or upset. In fact, the outcry must have been major, as Henderson long ago assumed.[8] In his 'Caesars' Suetonius seldom qualifies *invidia* with an adjective, but he regards it invariably as something that needs to be taken very seriously by its target and, if possible, diminished rather than, as here, augmented.[9] And since Nero's troop- and money-raising efforts described in the preceding chapter had led many to open defiance (*Nero* 44.2: 'ut plerique omnem collationem palam recusarent'), there can be little doubt that what the people felt was anger or even hatred (cf. 45.2: 'quare omnium in se odio incitato'). Such a reaction makes much better sense if this particular ship set out from Alexandria during the sailing season of 67, wintered at a harbour along the way, and put in at a time of shortage, weeks or even months before the regular convoy was due. In those circumstances its unexpected appearance would first have raised and then have disappointed the people's hopes of relief.[10]

Such a vessel, of course, could have docked in Puteoli at almost any date between the start of the sailing season in mid-March and the regular time of arrival in late May or early June; and since we do not know where it wintered, there is no obvious way of computing how long it needed to reach its destination. But Suetonius links the story of the ship directly to Nero's profiteering in grain, and that—as we have seen—he ties closely to the troop- and fund-raising efforts described in chapter 44. So, if we can determine when exactly those efforts took place, it should be possible to construct a timetable showing, for a start, that Clodius Macer was not responsible for the *publica fames*. The problem here is that while it seems generally to be agreed that Suetonius' account of Nero's last months (*Nero* 40–50) follows a chronological scheme,[11] it has also been argued that in chapters 41–5, the only ones with which our argument need

Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World (Princeton, 1971), 297–8; G. Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1980), 130.

[6] See especially Seneca, *E.M.* 77.1–2; Casson (n. 5), 297, n. 2; Rickman (n. 5), 70–1, 130.

[7] On the capacity of the Alexandrian ships see below, note 23. At this stage the *praefectus annonae* cannot have had the power even in a crisis to seize all grain coming into Rome (cf. Rickman [n. 5], 87ff.), but Nero could perhaps have closed down every granary in the city, as Caligula is supposed once to have done (Suet. *Cal.* 26.5).

[8] B. W. Henderson, *The Life and Principate of the Emperor Nero* (London, 1903), 409: 'Men's anger . . . rose to fever heat.'

[9] Suetonius uses *invidia* nineteen more times in the *Caesares* and once at *De rhet.* 6.2. He qualifies it with an adjective only four times (*Aug.* 27.3, *Cal.* 56.1, *Galb.* 16.1, *De rhet.* 6.2; but compare also *Claud.* 38.1, *Titus* 6.2). Usually he treats it as a known quantity (cf. *Jul.* 14.1 and 84.2, *Aug.* 71.1, *Tib.* 8 and 22; *Cal.* 9, *Nero* 34.1, *Otho* 6.1), which can be diminished (*Jul.* 4.1, *Nero* 33.2, *Vesp.* 23.1, *Dom.* 11.3) or, less commonly, increased (*Tib.* 75.3).

[10] For parallels see Casson (n. 5), 98, n. 6 and Rickman (n. 5), 131–2.

[11] See B. Mouchová, *Studie zu Kaiserbiographien Suetons* (Prague, 1968), 55–6, 96; E. Cizek, *Structures et idéologie dans 'Les Vies des Douze Césars' de Suétone* (Bucharest and Paris, 1977),

concern itself, he inserts into this framework two segments of material arranged *per species*, that the measures described in chapter 44 along with the story of the grain ship constitute one of these segments, and consequently that these events cannot be pinned down in time.[12]

It is the very fact that the story of the grain ship is tied so closely to the troop- and money-raising efforts described in chapter 44 which has prompted the claim that this material is arranged *per species*.[13] For if the ship had arrived at the usual time, in late May or early June, we would have no choice but to conclude that Suetonius had broken away from a straightforward chronological sequence. If the ship had docked at that point, its arrival would have coincided with, or even have followed, Nero's flight from Rome, a topic the biographer does not address until chapter 47. But as we have seen already, there is good reason to set the ship's arrival anything up to two months earlier, somewhere between March and May, precisely the period when Nero was attempting to raise troops and money, no matter how ineffectively. Hence the rupture in the chronological sequence turns out to be apparent rather than real, and we may safely return to the view that in this segment Suetonius is, after all, reporting events in the order in which they occurred.

This will not be considered conclusive, of course, unless we are able also to fit into this chronological scheme the other segment supposedly arranged *per species*, the description of the emperor's plans in chapter 43.[14] Here Suetonius reports ideas for revenge which Nero allegedly contemplated, and the details are important enough to warrant our quoting the passage in full:

initio statim tumultus multa et inmania, verum non abhorrentia a natura sua creditur destinasse: successores percussoresque summittere exercitus et provincias regentibus, quasi conspiratis idemque et unum sentientibus; quidquid ubique exulum, quidquid in urbe hominum Gallicanorum esset contrucidare, illos ne desciscentibus adgregarentur, hos ut conscios popularium suorum atque fautores; Gallias exercitibus diripiendas permittere; senatum universum veneno per convivia necare; urbem incendere feris in populum inmissis, quo difficilius defenderentur. (*Nero* 43.1)

Since Suetonius has already devoted two chapters to the outbreak of Vindex' revolt (40–41) and one to Galba's joining in (42), it may well seem difficult to believe that he is adhering in chapter 43 to the chronological order of events, rather than arranging the material *per species*. The opening words of the segment, after all, are *initio statim tumultus* and Vindex' uprising ought self-evidently to have been a *tumultus*. The various plans are termed *non abhorrentia a natura sua*, a description that could be taken as a rubric pointing to reportage *per species*. And the Gauls—provinces and people—figure prominently in the list of Nero's targets for revenge, a detail we could

56ff. (esp. 60) and 223. The same view appears to underlie the discussions by H. Gugel, *Studien zur biographischen Technik Suetons* (Vienna, Köln, and Graz, 1977), 57ff. and J. Gascou, *Suéton historien* (Paris and Rome, 1984), 789–90.

[12] See especially K. R. Bradley, *Suetonius'* Life of Nero. *An Historical Commentary* (Brussels, 1978), 240–1, based—in turn—on the discussion in Bradley (n. 2), 451ff.

[13] Bradley (n. 2), 452, having asserted that the contents of chapter 44 'were independently researched and catalogued by Suetonius', declares that 'the present passage is slightly misplaced, for in itself it has no direct reference to any deterrent action', and claims that its purpose is 'to reflect discredit on Nero through insistence on the inefficacy of his precautionary activities'. This begs the question, so long as the reasons for which Nero was raising the money are left unexplained (below, note 19).

[14] Since Bradley (n. 12), 263 concedes that §2 may be chronological after all, only §1 needs extended discussion.

again take as suggesting that Suetonius is talking of the time when Nero was preoccupied with Vindex.[15]

Yet there are difficulties in such an interpretation. At the point when Vindex began his rebellion, for example, there was little incentive for Nero to envisage killing all his army commanders and provincial governors for conspiring against him, let alone for poisoning the entire senate, or for setting fire to Rome itself after turning loose all the wild beasts in the city. According to Plutarch (*Galb.* 4.4), every one of his governors and army commanders, save only Galba, had turned over to the authorities the letters they had received from the rebel. To this, admittedly, it can be objected that these were not rational plans anyway. But let us note, first, that Dio-Xiphilinus (63.27.2) attributes similar aims to the emperor only in his very last days. Second, and more significant by far, even Suetonius concedes that Nero did not take Vindex' uprising seriously. As he says, what caused the emperor deep—and justifiable—alarm was the news that Galba had announced his support for the revolt at the start of April.[16] Allegations of conspiracy and plans to kill off governors, commanders, and senators would patently fit that situation much better, as also would threats against the Gauls, now that the emperor was disposed to take the rebellion seriously. Third, and most important of all, there is at *Nero* 49.4 confirmation that *initio statim tumultus* refers specifically to the start of Galba's rebellion. Here the biographer uses *tumultus* again (it is the only other example of the noun in the *Nero*), and declares that Galba's freedman Icelus had been thrown in chains *primo tumultu*. As Stein long ago recognized,[17] Icelus must have been put under guard when Nero learnt, not of Vindex' revolt, but of Galba's announcing his support for the uprising. As far as Nero was concerned, in other words, Vindex' revolt was a non-event; the crisis (*tumultus*) occurred when Galba took over its leadership.

So we can, after all, hold to the view that Suetonius records all these events in the correct chronological order. He begins with Nero's indifference to the news of Vindex' revolt (chapters 40–1), describes next his very different reaction to reports that Galba had decided to accept the leadership of the uprising (chapter 42), and then dwells on Nero's attempts to deal with this development (chapters 43–5). Hence the bizarre plans for revenge (43.1), and the preparations for a military expedition (44.1), some of them only slightly less bizarre, but including the troop- and money-raising efforts. Since the news of Galba's decision must have reached Rome around the third week of April,[18] we shall probably not go far wrong in setting the troop- and money-raising measures towards the end of that same month. Now, for people to have believed—and for Suetonius to have reported—that the Alexandrian ship's arrival, fortuitous as it was, was connected somehow with these counter-measures, the clipper ought to have docked at almost exactly the same time. And if the emperor then was profiteering in grain as one way of financing his war effort,[19] it would have been easy for people to

[15] Bradley (n. 12), 258–9; cf. B. H. Warmington, *Suetonius: Nero* (Bristol, 1977), 110; P. A. Gallivan, *Historia* 23 (1974), 315–16.

[16] Suetonius, *Nero* 42.1; cf. Plutarch, *Galb.* 5.3; Orosius 7.7.13. For the date of Galba's announcement, between April 2 and 6, see Fluss, *RE* 4A (1932), 778; M. Raoss, *Epigraphica* 22 (1960), 53, n. 3.

[17] Stein, *RE* 9 (1916), 820. Editions of the *Nero*, like *PIR*^{2} I.16, either leave the meaning of the passage unclear or ignore it altogether.

[18] See D. C. A. Shotter, *Historia* 24 (1975), 66–7.

[19] Bradley (n. 2), 451 leaves open the question how or why Nero profiteered from the high price of grain, while Warmington (n. 15), 111 and Gallivan (n. 15), 316 confess themselves unable to explain it. See further below.

take the ship's being loaded with wrestling sand as one part of Nero's plans to intensify the grain shortage and so to raise money, meanwhile—in their general exasperation—ignoring or forgetting the fact that he planned to use this money to deal with his opponents.

At first sight, this interpretation may well appear to confirm the thesis that Clodius Macer was responsible for the shortage of grain in Rome. By the end of April, so it might seem reasonable to assume, any number of grain ships from Africa ought not only to have docked in Ostia but also to have unloaded their cargoes.[20] By the same token, people in Rome ought not to have been nearly so angry about the Alexandrian ship's carrying wrestling sand, unless supplies from Africa had already been cut off by Macer. This oversimplifies the situation grossly, however. For one thing, grain should in any case have been coming in also from Spain, from Sicily, and from Sardinia.[21] For another, whether or not Africa sent twice as much grain to Rome as did Egypt,[22] African grain did not arrive in two giant consignments, each brought by a veritable fleet. The vessels from Africa (and no doubt from the other provinces too) appear at this time to have conveyed only between 10,000 and 50,000 modii of grain apiece, the merest trickle by comparison with the 180,000 modii or so carried by each Alexandrian ship;[23] and since the run from Africa was so fast, a matter of two to six days,[24] there was no more compelling reason to regiment these ships than there was to increase their capacity.[25] So the African ships came and went throughout the entire sailing season, and whether they turned up one at a time or ten at a time, their arrival was as undramatic as their cargo was small. Finally, Suetonius tells us explicitly that the emotion felt by the citizenry was something like resentment (*invidia*) or hatred (*odio*). These are emotions surely more likely to have been aroused by a shortage of grain which—so the people apparently concluded—was generated artificially by their antic emperor. A dearth would have created fear or even panic, as actually happened in January 70. According to Tacitus (*Hist.* 4.38.1), the citizenry panicked then because they thought, erroneously, that the African grain had been cut off. As we shall see, that shortage was far more acute than the one described by Suetonius, because the number of mouths to be fed was vastly greater and curtailment even of the relatively small

[20] With the African, as with the Alexandrian ships, docking and unloading could be two distinct processes: see especially Casson (n. 5), 298, n. 5.

[21] That the Baetis valley in eastern Spain was already producing surplus grain is shown by Claudius' recalling and expelling from the senate in 44 the governor of Baetica, Umbonius Silio, for his failure to send sufficient grain to the troops operating in Mauretania (Dio 60.24.5; cf. J. J. Van Nostrand, *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* 3 [Baltimore, 1937], 175–6). For Sardinia and Sicily, see Rickman (n. 5), 83, 104ff. If there were disturbances in Sicily in 68 (Raoss [n. 16], 72), they need not have interfered with the grain supply. There is also the possibility that grain was brought in from other regions of Italy, although this most likely happened only when provincial supplies failed or were otherwise held up: see N. Morley, *Metropolis and Hinterland* (Cambridge, 1996), 147–8.

[22] Against the mechanical combining of the *Epit. de Caes.* 1.6 and Josephus, *BJ* 2.383, see especially Rickman (n. 5), 231–5.

[23] The best discussion of the problems involved in computing the capacity of the Alexandrian clippers is that of J. Rougé, *Recherches sur l'organisation du commerce maritime en Méditerranée sous l'empire romain* (Paris, 1966), 66–73. For the African ships, see Rougé (ibid.), 72 and Rickman (n. 5), 17.

[24] Cf. F. J. Meijer, *Mnemosyne* 37 (1984), 117–24.

[25] Ships from Africa were organized into a fleet only by Commodus: see SHA, *Comm.* 17.7; Meiggs (n. 4), 79. In the fourth century African ships were also forbidden to depart before 1 April, but this proves only that previously they had been leaving earlier: cf. E. Tengström, *Bread for the People* (Stockholm, 1974), 39ff.; B. Sirks, *Food for Rome* (Amsterdam, 1991), 42–3.

flow of grain from Africa threatened catastrophe.[26] In the shortage of 68, by contrast, we can argue that the flow of grain from Africa would have been sufficient to ensure that the pressure did not increase, but insufficient either to ease it or, in consequence, to bring down the price of such grain as was available. So there is nothing here to compel the conclusion that the shortage of 68 was caused by Clodius Macer.

To this it can readily be objected that, so far, no case has been made to compel any other conclusion. In fact, however, we have solid chronological grounds for ruling out Macer. Reporting Otho's decision to pardon Calvia Crispinilla in mid-January 69, Tacitus says of her:

> magistra libidinum Neronis, transgressa in Africam ad instigandum in arma Clodium Macrum, famem populo Romano haud obscure molita, totius postea civitatis gratiam obtinuit, consulari matrimonio subnixa et apud Galbam Othonem Vitellium illaesa, mox potens pecunia et orbitate, quae bonis malisque temporibus iuxta valent. (*Hist.* 1. 73)

Since we have no reason to question the accuracy of Tacitus' statement, this passage proves beyond all doubt that Calvia Crispinilla was the moving spirit behind Macer's attempt to starve the city.[27] Admittedly, her motives have been much debated,[28] but for the *publica fames* recorded by Suetonius to have been caused by Macer's actions, she must have travelled to Africa before Nero's suicide. So, of all the possibilities that have been canvassed, only two require discussion: whether she made the trip with the emperor's blessing, or if she acted against his wishes.

We know that Calvia Crispinilla was a wealthy and a greedy woman,[29] and we can safely assume that she was calculating and shrewd as well: she would not otherwise have been able to survive as Nero's *magistra libidinum*. Such a woman would not have jeopardized her standing or her possessions by quitting Nero's court and sailing to Africa unless (i) she was ordered to do so by the emperor, or (ii) she saw that there was nothing to be gained by remaining in Rome.[30] If she was acting against Nero's wishes, therefore, she is not likely to have quitted the emperor's side before the middle of May at the earliest, when she learnt about the disquieting conduct of Verginius Rufus in the aftermath of Vesontio.[31] If, on the other hand, she was sent to Africa by Nero, specifically *ad instigandum in arma Clodium Macrum*, she will not have set out before the third or fourth week of April, when—as we have seen—Nero began his counter-measures against Galba. In either case, she would have needed time to find a ship, time to sail to Carthage, time to travel the 165–70 miles overland to Ammaedara, Macer's

[26] For the detailed arguments, see the concluding paragraphs of this paper.

[27] As is remarked by Bessone (n. 2), 43–4, doubts about this passage are voiced only by scholars who cannot fit it into their reconstruction of events.

[28] Some modern scholars think Calvia Crispinilla Nero's ally, others his enemy; some set her trip to Africa before the emperor's death in early June, others after it. Since my one concern is to sever any links between the *publica fames* and Macer's actions, I have deliberately passed over problems that do not affect the immediate argument (Macer's uprising and Calvia Crispinilla's part in it I discuss in detail elsewhere).

[29] Cf. V. A. Sirago, *Vichiana* 7 (1978), 304, albeit to support a very different argument. Whether Calvia Crispinilla already owned extensive properties in Histria (Sirago 296–7), she had become notorious for her avarice during Nero's trip to Greece (Dio–Xiphilinus 63.12.3–4).

[30] The suggestion of Bradley (n. 2), 455, that Calvia Crispinilla survived the perils of 69 by 'espousal of an insurrectionist cause', and so (ibid., 456–7) that she left for Africa 'well before the death of Nero', is a hypothesis designed mainly to permit the conclusion that Macer's uprising, at her instigation, 'probably began at the very end of March'. However attractive this may appear in abstract, it ignores both the realities with which she had to contend at Nero's court and the seeming strength of the emperor's position before Vesontio.

[31] Cf. Shotter (n. 18), 70.

headquarters,[32] and time to persuade Macer to accede to her wishes. And after that, Macer himself would have needed time to organize his troops and march them all the way to the coast in order to shut down the granaries and harbours there.[33] Even on the assumption that all these measures took only two weeks,[34] the legate could not have begun to close the ports before the middle of May, if he was acting on Nero's orders, or before the end of the month, if he was acting against him. As we have already seen, the *publica fames* was being felt in Rome much earlier, around the end of April.

Once it is conceded that Macer was not involved, it is far from easy to determine how serious this *publica fames* was, or what caused it. As Suetonius uses *fames*—and he does so in twelve passages aside from the one we are considering—the noun can cover anything from the pangs of hunger Nero felt during his flight from Rome (*Nero* 48.4) all the way up to actual starvation (cf. *Nero* 36.2).[35] As a rule, the immediate context indicates precisely what is meant, and here we are told that while the problem affected the community as a whole (*publica*), there was grain to be had, albeit at a price, since the emperor was speculating in it (*ex annonae quoque caritate lucranti*). This detail too suggests, therefore, that we are discussing a shortage rather than a dearth.[36] Suetonius may also use *fames* to denote a shortage brought about by natural causes (cf. *Tib.* 52.2) or one caused by human agency (cf. *Aug.* 16.1), but it is not in every instance easy to deduce from the context which form he has in mind. Thus, talking of criticism Octavian incurred at a time of 'summa . . . peniuria ac fames' (*Aug.* 70.2), he never mentions the man responsible, Sextus Pompey. This again would permit us to argue that Macer was responsible for the *fames* of 68, had we not already ruled him out on other grounds. By the same token, we cannot simply discount natural causes, but two facts are highly suggestive. First, there was grain to be had in Rome, even if at a price: so the shortage there, to some extent at least, had been created artificially. Second, as Suetonius tells his story, the people expected the Alexandrian ship to be carrying grain instead of wrestling sand: as far as they knew, there was no

[32] Since legion III Augusta is first attested at Theveste in 76 (*CIL* 11.10119), it seems generally to be agreed that Ammaedara was its headquarters until the middle of Vespasian's reign: cf. P. Romanelli, *Storia delle province Romane dell'Africa* (Rome, 1959), 186, 293; M. Rachet, *Rome et les Berbères* (Brussels, 1970), 152, n. 2; N. Duval, *ANRW* 2.10.2 (1982), 638–9. There would have been little point in Calvia Crispinilla's appealing to the proconsul in Carthage (perhaps T. Curtilius Mancia). If the latter had at his disposal an urban cohort, its primary task was no doubt the same as that of the cohorts Claudius had placed at Ostia and Puteoli, to guard against fires (Suet. *Claud.*25.2: 'ad arcendos incendiorum casus'). But a cohort may not yet have been stationed in Carthage: see H. Freis, *Die Cohortes Urbanae* (Köln and Graz, 1967), 31ff.

[33] In one sense Macer's task need not have been especially difficult. Although African grain could be shipped from any number of harbours (see R. M. Haywood, *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* 4 [Baltimore, 1938], 69–70), in Nero's reign the bulk of it seems to have been grown in the lower Bagradas valley and dispatched through Carthage (cf. Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.38).

[34] Calvia Crispinilla probably required three or four weeks to carry out her mission, but for the sake of argument I have assumed that each step in the process took minimal time: hence one day for her to find a ship, 3–4 days to sail to Africa, another 3–4 days to travel overland to Ammaedara, one day for her to convince Macer and for him to ready the troops for their march, and five days for the men to cover the 165–70 miles to Carthage.

[35] The twelve passages are *Jul.* 68.2; *Aug.* 14, 16.1, and 70.2; *Tib.* 52.2 and 54.2; *Cal.* 26.5 and 31; *Nero* 36.2 and 48.4; *Galb.* 7.2; *Otho* 9.1. See also P. Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge, 1988), 18ff.

[36] In such a situation, as Rickman (n. 5), 144 and Garnsey (n. 35), 32ff. remark, the poor may have starved, but there was hardly a famine. Despite Warmington (n. 15), 111, Suetonius' testimony is not contradicted by Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.89.1. He, talking of the situation in Rome on the eve of Otho's departure for the north in March 69, states only that the people suffered appreciably more than they had *motu Vindicis* (cf. Garnsey [n. 35], 224).

shortage in Egypt. Hence it appears logical to conclude from our passage that the biographer does not identify the cause of the *fames* of 68, because the agent responsible is the person of whom he is already talking, Nero himself. Not only had the emperor stocks of grain on which to profiteer. He was also thought to have reasons—bizarre though they might be—for intensifying the shortage by ordering at least one Alexandrian ship loaded with wrestling sand.

To get any further, three points need to be kept in mind. First, though the question at issue on this occasion was the purchase of grain, this affected all the citizenry, the *plebs frumentaria* included: Nero had suspended the distributions of free grain after the great fire of 64 (Dio 62.18.5).[37] Second, from the time of Augustus onwards, the emperor was expected to intervene in an emergency of this kind: he could make bulk purchases on the open market and distribute them in Rome, as Augustus did in his early years (*R.G.* 5.2; cf. 15.1); or he could release stores of grain he himself held in reserve, as Augustus reports doing on more than one occasion later in his reign;[38] or he could try to encourage private merchants to redouble their efforts, the method preferred by Tiberius and Claudius (Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.87; Suetonius, *Claud.* 18.2). In 68, however, Nero was not only acting contrary to custom; he was also repudiating the procedures he himself had followed earlier. In 62, when the Romans lost 300 ships, he had prevented a panic by dumping spoiled grain in the Tiber to show his own confidence in the supply situation.[39] And in 64, though he had suspended the *frumentationes*, he had brought in plentiful supplies of grain from outside and had set the price at a mere three sesterces per modius (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.39.2). Third, whether or not Suetonius himself recognized that Nero, in holding back the grain at his disposal, was intent on raising money to finance his efforts against Galba, he placed the episode where he does and sewed it tightly into this particular context, because he believed that this was where it belonged. So even if we regard the way Suetonius tells his story as a distortion of the facts, brought on perhaps by the people's misunderstanding of Nero's motives, perhaps by the biographer's own wish to highlight the absurdity of the emperor's various undertakings, the story itself is altogether pointless if Nero did not in fact try to profiteer on grain under his control. And that, in turn, requires that we try to establish his motives for profiteering.

This, however, brings up another difficulty: the emperor cannot have held onto this grain *primarily* in order to raise money. When we take into account the time of year at which the fund-raising and the ship's arrival occurred (late April), Nero stood to gain little, no matter how high the price of grain rose. He could not afford to release large quantities into circulation without driving down the price. And in a matter of weeks more than enough fresh supplies would have arrived to undercut the prices he was

[37] Gallotta (n. 2), 44ff. argues, unpersuasively, against Dio's statement that Nero suspended the *frumentationes*.

[38] Augustus, *R.G.* 18. There is no knowing how much grain was held in reserve at any point in Nero's reign. Although Septimius Severus is said to have left a seven years' reserve on his death (SHA, *Sep. Sev.* 8.5), quantities must obviously have been much lower in the first century if, in crises, the reserve could be figured in days, seven or eight in 41 (Seneca, *De brev. vitae* 18.5), fifteen in 51 (Tacitus, *Ann.*12.43.2), and ten in 70 (Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.52.2: see below).

[39] Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.18.2, reporting that the Romans lost 200 ships in a storm at Ostia and another 100 to fire on the Tiber. Although L.Casson, *JRS* 55 (1965), 33, n. 20 and 36, n. 47 takes all 300 to have been river boats, those caught in the storm may well have been sea-going vessels (cf. Meiggs [n. 4], 58–9; Griffin [n. 2], 106). There is no telling what percentage this represents of the total shipping involved, but the absence of any problems with the grain supply in the following years suggests—despite the doubts of Garnsey (n. 35), 224—either that the losses had little effect or that they were swiftly made good.

charging. Quite apart from any grain ships which arrived from Sardinia, Sicily, and Spain as well as Africa before the end of May, the Alexandrian clippers were themselves due in another month to six weeks. Unless the emperor also planned to put a guard on every single granary in Rome, Ostia, and Puteoli, the city would soon be all but awash in grain. So the fund-raising appears to have been a short-term, opportunistic by-product of a different plan, a means of raising some cash for immediate use through the distribution of small quantities of grain.

What appears to have been overlooked in most previous discussions of the passage is the link between money, grain, and troops. Suetonius, after all, passes from Nero's attempts to raise troops to his raising of money, then to his (implied) hoarding of grain, and finally to the story that the emperor profiteered on that grain. Whether or not Suetonius himself recognized it, the linkage lies in Nero's need not only to raise the cash with which to pay his troops but also to find the supplies with which to feed them. In the words with which Sallust has Pompey address the senate, 'per deos immortalis, utrum me vicem aerari praestare censetis an exercitum sine frumento et stipendio habere posse?'[40] Not that it is so surprising that the biographer fails to mention this connection explicitly, instead subordinating Nero's attempts to lay in supplies to allegations about his profiteering in grain. If we look at the run of the narrative, the scandalous stories about Amazons and water organs help to explain why none of the citizens of Rome volunteered to serve, forcing Nero not only to levy slaves but also to exact large sums of money from the inhabitants. This then leaves up in the air his reasons for hoarding grain, and so leads naturally to the accusation that his aim was nothing more than to profiteer.

This is of a piece with the fact that Nero's response to the crisis was far more vigorous than Suetonius would have us believe. For a start, the emperor recalled units on their way to the east, among them legions I Italica and XIV Gemina, the latter accompanied by its eight cohorts of Batavian auxiliaries, and in the emperor's last days these forces were stationed in the Cisalpina under the command of P. Petronius Turpilianus (*cos. ord.* 61).[41] Warmington, indeed, has suggested that the grain shortage in Rome could be attributed, in part, to the needs of the forces which took up position in the Cisalpina.[42] But it would not have been for this reason that Nero was hoarding grain in the city itself. The obvious way to feed the troops in the north was by diverting grain ships into the Adriatic, as must have been done during the Pannonian–Dalmatian revolt: under the year 9 Dio states specifically that the fighting in Dalmatia kept dragging on and famine occurred in Italy mostly because of this (λιμοῦ δι' αὐτὸν οὐχ ἥκιστα ἐν τῇ Ἰταλίᾳ γενομένου). The two events can be linked only if grain ships destined for Rome were being sent to supply the troops campaigning in Dalmatia.[43]

[40] Sallust, *Hist.* 2.98.2. The thought was hardly new: as Polybius 6.15.4 observed, armies require a constant flow of grain, clothing, and pay, and Vegetius 3.3 expatiates on the subject. The link between grain and troops is recognized by Garnsey (n. 35), 228, but the broad scope of his work hardly allows him to apply it specifically to the incidents under discussion here.

[41] Cf. G. E. F. Chilver, *A Historical Commentary on Tacitus' Histories' I and II* (Oxford, 1979), 7–8; Shotter (n. 18), 67–8.

[42] Warmington (n. 15), 111. Although Cisalpine Gaul was the most fertile part of Italy, the evidence suggests that its farmers were producing grain for local consumption only (G. E. F. Chilver, *Cisalpine Gaul* [Oxford, 1941], 135–6; cf. Rickman (n. 5), 101–2; Morley [n. 21], 148). Hence the claim of Suetonius Paulinus, just before First Bedriacum, that if the Othonians refused to give battle, the Vitellian forces opposing them would be unable to sustain themselves for long in the Transpadana (Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.32.1; cf. Suetonius, *Otho* 9.1).

[43] Dio 56.12.1; cf. Garnsey (n. 35), 228.

If Nero was hoarding grain in Rome, it must have been for troops he intended to raise in the city. There, he not only began the creation of a legion from the marines.[44] As Suetonius tells us, he also 'summoned the city tribes to enlist, but received no response' (*Nero* 44.1: 'tribus urbanas ad sacramentum citavit . . . nullo idoneo respondente'). When Vitellius made an equally desperate appeal to the populace in December 69, he elicited an overwhelming response, and though the enthusiasm of senators and knights soon evaporated (Tacitus, *Hist.* 3.58), what Tacitus calls variously the *volgus urbanum* and the *imbellis populus* still sallied forth to do battle with Antonius Primus' troops (*Hist.* 3.80.1 and 82.1). Nero may or may not have been deluded to expect a similar flood of recruits. The important consideration is that if he anticipated any response at all (and this he must have done), he had to hold back the grain which would be needed to feed the volunteers. Then, when this plan miscarried, he resorted to another stop-gap measure and put some of the grain back onto the market, hoping at least to raise additional funds from that.

To support this interpretation, it will be helpful to look at another episode usually ignored in discussions of the grain supply, but an episode that illustrates the difficulties created in Rome by the advent of military mouths to feed. At the very start of 70, so says Tacitus, there was a panic in Rome caused by the people's baseless fears that the governor of Africa, L. Piso (*cos.* 57), had shut down the harbours there:

> interea Vespasianus iterum ac Titus consulatum absentes inierunt, maesta et multiplici metu suspensa civitate, quae super instantia mala falsos pavores induerat, descivisse Africam res novas moliente L. Pisone. is <pro consule> provinciae nequaquam turbidus ingenio; sed quia naves saevitia hiemis prohibebantur, volgus alimenta in dies mercari solitum, cui una ex re publica annonae cura, clausum litus, retineri commeatus, dum timet, credebat. (*Hist.* 4.38)

The panic itself is understandable: after Macer's efforts (later) in 68, the populace would have been particularly sensitive to rumours about problems with grain coming from Africa. What Tacitus does not spell out, however, is why there should have been a shortage of grain—real or apparent—sufficient to spark a panic on January 1.[45]

There had been serious flooding in Rome in March 69, and that probably destroyed much of the grain stored in the city at the time.[46] Any pressure this caused will have been eased, to some extent, by Otho's taking with him to the north large numbers of troops at this same time.[47] But the effect can only have been transitory, cancelled out by the arrival of the Vitellian forces in Rome in mid-July and their staying in the city until mid-September,[48] itself a problem surely aggravated when the prefect of Egypt,

[44] On I Adiutrix, see e. g. H. P. Miller, *G&R* 28 (1981), 73ff.

[45] Seneca, *De brev. vitae* 18.5 claims that there were supplies only for 7–8 days at the time of Caligula's murder, this on 24 January, so that *fames* impended. Although he attributes the shortage to the disruption of grain supplies caused by Caligula's bridge of boats (cf. Dio 59.17.2), the claim is obviously absurd (J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *The Emperor Gaius* [Oxford, 1934], 189–90; A. A. Barrett, *Caligula: the Corruption of Power* [London, 1989], 194–5; Garnsey [n. 35], 222–3). What is important is that Seneca considers a shortage so early in the year to be abnormal. Similarly, the dearth in Claudius' reign was accounted a prodigy by some (Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.43.1). Who sent for the supplies in 69/70 is uncertain (below, note 54).

[46] Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.86.2. Since he talks of *peniuria alimentorum*, there was some grain to be had, presumably stored in Ostia and Puteoli.

[47] On the composition of Otho's forces, see Chilver (n. 41), 175–6, 269ff.

[48] Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.87.1–2 waxes eloquent on the swathe of destruction the Vitellian forces cut through Italy as they marched south, but once he has them in Rome, he dwells on the health problems they suffered, not on any supply difficulties they caused to others (ibid., 93.1). Tacitus also says (ibid., 87.1) that the troops alone numbered 60,000: if each of them required 4–5 modii of grain per month (cf. Rickman [n. 5], 10 and literature cited therein), they could have consumed between 480,000 and 600,000 modii during their stay.

Tiberius Alexander, proclaimed Vespasian emperor on 1 July 69 and shut down Alexandria thereafter (Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.79 and 82.3), thus preventing the second sailing of the Alexandrian grain ships.[49] Yet, in 69, there was no interference with the grain shipments from Spain, from Sardinia, from Sicily, or even from Africa, Clodius Macer having long since been removed.[50] There are nonetheless two other untoward events to be taken into account, both of them linked with the ferocious fighting between the Vitellians and the troops of Antonius Primus in the last two months of the year, and both of them—given the time of year at which they occurred—more or less guaranteed to aggravate any grain shortage considerably.

First, there is Tacitus' report that when Vespasian heard of Antonius Primus' victory at Cremona,

> eo properantius Alexandriam pergit, ut fractos Vitellii exercitus urbemque externae opis indigam fame urgeret. namque et Africam eodem latere sitam terra marique invadere parabat, clausis annonae subsidiis inopiam ac discordiam hosti facturus.[51] (*Hist.* 3.48.3)

The important point is not Vespasian's plans for Africa, never fulfilled anyway, but his conceiving them at this stage and his concluding that Rome could now be starved into surrender. There had been nothing of this in the council of war held at Beirut in June, even though Vespasian was planning then to block the grain supplies from Egypt.[52] What prompted such thoughts at this particular juncture was surely the idea that Vitellius' forces, broken at Cremona, would fall back naturally on Rome, and so would not only increase enormously the number of mouths to feed but also, in all likelihood, requisition for their own purposes whatever grain was to be had in the city, thereby creating at one and the same time *inopia* among the hapless citizenry and *discordia* between the soldiery and the civilians. It might even be surmised that one of the reasons for the common people's rallying behind Vitellius so enthusiastically to face Antonius Primus (Tacitus, *Hist.* 3.80.1 and 82.1) was their recognition that this would at least bring them food to eat.

Second, there was the battle for Rome itself in mid-December (Tacitus, *Hist.* 3.78–86) and, probably much more serious, the near anarchy which supposedly prevailed between the Flavians' victory and the arrival of Mucianus around the turn of the year (*Hist.* 4.1–11).[53] These were happenings that would obviously have made it difficult, even dangerous, for people to pick up their grain. They would have produced an acute shortage too, if the Flavian troops now seized for their own sustenance all stocks of grain in the city, those already requisitioned by the defeated Vitellians and whatever other supplies they themselves could find.[54] Not only would this be a natural

[49] On the second run, see the literature cited in note 5 above. This is considered the main reason for the shortage by H. Le Bonniec and J. Hellegouarc'h, *Tacite, Histoires, Livres IV et V* (Paris, 1992), 149, n. 6.

[50] The news of Macer's assassination reached Rome around the time Galba entered the city, i.e. in September 68: see Tacitus, *Hist.*1.7.1; Plutarch, *Galb.* 15.3; Suetonius, *Galb.* 11; Chilver (n. 41), 56–7.

[51] There are problems with the text. The Mediceus reads 'fracto . . . exercitus', *fractos* being an emendation by Meiser. Although there is a parallel for such an error at *Hist.* 4.33.1, where the Mediceus reads *intento hostis* for *intentos hostis*, some editors (Orelli, Valmaggi, and Wellesley, for example) prefer to retain *fracto* and emend to *exercitu.* This, however, requires a further emendation, in that the *-que* attached to *urbem* later in the clause must be modified to *quoque* (the reading of the *deteriores*).

[52] Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.82.3; at that point 'Vespasianum obtinere claustra Aegypti placuit'.

[53] Exactly when Mucianus entered Rome is uncertain, but it must have been in the last days of December 69 or the first days of January 70: see Josephus, *BJ* 4.654 and Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.10.1.

[54] Since Tacitus in our passage talks of the African ships' being delayed by the *saevitia maris* in

step for them to take, but yet another incident from this same period suggests strongly that they did exactly this. When Mucianus arrived in Rome, says Tacitus (*Hist.* 4.2.1), he found not only that power rested with Antonius Primus, but also that the latter's henchman, Arrius Varus, had become prefect of the praetorian guard, whether elected to the post by the soldiery or appointed by his leader. In either case, Mucianus needed to break their hold on the city, and one of his first moves was to persuade Varus to take instead the post of *praefectus annonae* (*Hist.* 4.11.1 and 68.2).

Mucianus' plan would never have succeeded had the new job been too obviously a demotion, and whatever the relative merits of the two prefectships, the *annona* probably looked unusually important at this particular time. Yet, on the face of it, nothing fitted Varus for the post. As Rickman has pointed out, in the first two centuries the prefects of the grain supply never held beforehand any junior positions connected with the *annona*, but they always possessed the general administrative experience essential to the functioning of the office.[55] Varus' career, by contrast, had been exclusively military and, in 69 particularly, he had won distinction not behind a desk but at the forefront of his troops.[56] It seems far from unreasonable to conclude that Mucianus picked Varus also because he was a man whom the troops respected, a man—that is—who stood some chance of persuading the soldiery, if not to disgorge the grain they had appropriated, at least to share it more equitably with the civilian population, until such time as additional supplies could be brought in.[57] And Varus may even have had some success: that he was unable to solve the problem is clear from Tacitus' later report that Vespasian 'celerrimas navium frumento onustas saevo adhuc mari committit' (*Hist.* 4.52.2; cf. Dio–Zonaras 66.9.2a). But this suggests also that Varus managed to postpone the crisis: for Vespasian to intervene, the news had to be sent to him, and he then had to dispatch the ships. When they arrived, probably in February or March 70, there was still ten days' reserve in the granaries.[58]

If this reconstruction is correct, it is easy to see why the shortage of grain in January 70 produced a panic. The shortage in the spring of 68, on the other hand, was serious enough to generate *invidia* and *odium*, not serious enough to appear life-threatening. Nor was it caused by Clodius Macer. Rather, the person responsible for the *publica fames* was Nero himself, this being one part of his plans for dealing with Galba—plans nobody else at the time seems to have understood or to have tried very hard to

January 70, they were probably supposed to bring in emergency supplies. But given the speed with which voyages to and from Africa could be made (above, note 24), there is no knowing whether the supplies were intended originally for Vitellius' forces, those falling back on Rome from the north and those the emperor himself raised in the city, or if the Flavians sent for them once they gained control of the city.

[55] Rickman (n. 5), 81–2, 219–20.

[56] See especially H. Pavis d'Escurac, *La Préfecture de l'annone, service administratif impérial d'Auguste à Constantin* (Rome, 1976), 323.

[57] Since Mucianus was capable of such cunning, it is also likely that Varus' attempts to carry out his new duties were meant to cost him some of the popularity he had enjoyed previously with the troops. It is unfortunate, therefore, that we cannot determine how long he remained *praefectus annonae*. His being close to Domitian (Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.68.2) is not likely to have endeared him to Vespasian or Titus, but the *pernicies* which befell him later (Tacitus, *Hist.* 3.6.1) was clearly not demotion on this occasion.

[58] There is no good reason to accept the view, advanced by H. Heubner, *P. Cornelius Tacitus, Die Historien, Band IV: Viertes Buch* (Heidelberg, 1976), 124 and repeated by Le Bonniec and Hellegouarc'h (n. 49), 149, n. 5, that the words *saevo adhuc mari* rule out an arrival date in February. The ships would have needed to make very good time to reach Rome before the end of that month, but Tacitus' phrasing tells us only that he did not know, or chose not to give, a precise date for the ships' departure from Alexandria.

understand, perhaps because by now the last thing they expected from their emperor was rational behaviour. In fact, he needed not only money with which to pay the troops he was raising but also grain to feed them. As it happened, he set aside more grain, probably much more grain, than was required, since the people's response to his recruiting in Rome was anything but enthusiastic. As a temporary measure, therefore, he decided to raise additional sums of money by selling off small quantities of grain at an inflated price. And while this was going on, a stray Alexandrian ship arrived in Ostia, loaded with wrestling sand instead of the grain that the people expected. Hence the story that the emperor's aim was simply to profiteer, not to reserve grain or—failing that—to procure additional funds for the forces he was attempting to muster against Galba.[59]

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