

# Absolute power and the unsustainability of tyranny: Seneca's depiction of Nero's power in *De Clementia*

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## INTRODUCTION

Seneca, a Roman philosopher and a senior advisor to the emperor Nero, wrote the treatise *De Clementia* circa 55 CE, in which he advises Nero to fulfil his obligations to the citizenry which, in particular, includes practising clemencia. *Clementia* is defined as the opposite of cruelty and the selection of the mildest penalty that can still be considered just when adjudicating punishments. In this research project, I argue that Seneca's political advice contained in *De Clementia* presents Nero's possession of absolute power as contingent upon his ability to fulfil his obligations to the Roman elite. Further, this reading provides an accurate account of the political dynamics between Nero's regime and Rome's aristocracy that has not been examined sufficiently by previous analyses of this treatise.



Figure 1. A copy of a graffito made in Rome during the first century CE, which likely depicts the emperor Nero. Castren and Lilius, *Graffiti del Palatino II, Domus Tiberiana: a curva di Paavo*, 1970, p. 121, no. 3

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF CLEMENTIA

Bestowing *clementia* is a statement of supreme power because only those who have the absolute authority to punish others can practise it. The top-down nature of *clementia* leads Seneca to compare emperor Nero to the father of the Roman people and a god throughout the treatise. Indeed, Seneca presents the emperor's power in absolute terms. However, giving *clementia* was not only a demonstration of supreme power, but also a mechanism through which an emperor could secure his reign from conspiracies and revolts (Braund, 2009, p. 32). Thus, Seneca writes that *clementia* is simultaneously "an adornment of supreme power and its surest security (*De Clementia*, 1.11.4)."

## THE CONDITIONALITY OF ABSOLUTE POWER

Seneca uses the opposing models of rulership of the king and the tyrant to guide Nero's behaviour. Crucially, Seneca writes that a king is distinguished from a tyrant by "his behaviour, not his title," and particularly by his demonstration of *clementia*, or lack thereof (1.12.1-3). Beyond practising *clementia*, Seneca asserts that a king must set a moral example with his own behaviour, prioritise the interests of the citizenry before his own, and avoid punishing others who have wronged him personally. This distinction is of the utmost importance since, according to Seneca, a king can expect his citizens to protect his life and sovereignty at all costs, whereas a tyrant will be subject to frequent revolts and assassination attempts by his subjects. For instance, Seneca writes that the subjects of a king are willing "to lay down their lives if his path to safety must be paved with their corpses (1.3.3)." Conversely, Seneca warns Nero that "whole nations and peoples have undertaken to destroy their tyrannical rulers, both when they've suffered and when suffering has been threatened (1.26.1)." Thus, while Seneca asserts that both the king and the tyrant possess absolute power, only the king, who fulfils his obligations to the citizenry by ruling mildly, can expect to retain it.

## CLEMENTIA AS SAFETY

Despite Seneca's depiction of Nero's power as absolute, *De Clementia* repeatedly asserts that Nero needs to exercise *clementia* and fulfil his other obligations if he is to maintain his dangerous position as emperor (1.11.4). It is worth asking what sort of opposition Seneca anticipates for an emperor who forgets his obligations. I argue that in Seneca's depiction, potential conspirators in *De Clementia* are intended to be understood as members of Rome's political elite, which includes the aristocrats and Nero's bodyguard. Both of these groups had access to the emperor which created impending danger for a would-be tyrant. In one instance, Seneca tells the story of the emperor Augustus' treatment of Lucius Cinna, an aristocrat who had been caught plotting against Augustus, to demonstrate to Nero how *clementia* can ensure the safety of the emperor. Although Augustus was subject to many plots in the past, he was able to halt all future attempts on his life by showing *clementia* to Cinna, rather than punishing him (1.9.12). Accordingly, Seneca states that *clementia* is the "surest security" for "supreme power (1.8.6)." Whereas harsh punishments will only serve to direct harm back at the emperor because "as many sources of peril pursue him as there are people he has imperilled (1.8.7, 1.25.3)." Thus, Seneca suggests that carrying out executions could cause an endangered citizen to make a desperate attempt on the emperor's life (1.12.5).



Figure 2 *Nero at Baiae*, by Jan Styka, circa 1800, oil on canvass, Polonia Private Collection

## THE HISTORICAL RELEVANCE OF SENECA'S ADVICE

Seneca's advice regarding the consequences of the emperor's cruel treatment of his citizens is validated by numerous instances of regicide in Roman history after an emperor governed in the model of a tyrant. The emperors Caligula, Domitian, Commodus, and Nero himself were all either killed or forced to commit suicide after their actions failed to consider the interests of Rome's political elites. Ancient sources state that these emperors met premature ends, in part, as the result of the following types of behaviour: inflicting cruel and unjust punishments, acting in ways that offended Roman cultural sensitivities (such as performing on stage and committing parricide), and causing political elites to fear for their lives who in turn felt compelled to make an attempt on the emperor's life, just as Seneca had warned (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 19.1-5; Suetonius, *Domitian*, 1.15-1.17; Dio Cassius, 63.22, 73.22; Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.49-50, 67)

## CONCLUSION

In *De Clementia*, Seneca warns Nero that while the power that he wields is absolute, his possession of this power is not. Because failing to uphold his obligations to Roman elites will eventually lead political elites to plot against the emperor. Seneca's view of the emperor's power as conditional is supported by Roman history, since emperors who did not uphold their obligations faced opposition from political elites in the form of private plots. Thus, Seneca's presentation of the emperor's power provides a glimpse into the political reality facing Nero and other Roman emperors during the 1st and 2nd century CE; although the highest rung of decision-making authority was concentrated in the hands of one man, he had to wield his supreme power with moderation and benevolence if he was going to keep it.

## CITATIONS

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