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Stefan Radt / l'incendio dei libri di
Mommsen / Denis Page sulla peste di
Atene / il nuovo Syme / rileggere Euclide**

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REFLECTIONS ON THE AUTHOR, CONTEXT AND AUDIENCE OF THE SO-CALLED *APOTHEOSIS OF POPPAEA* (*P.OXY. LXXVII 5105*)

ABSTRACT. This paper aims to identify the possible author, historical context and audience of *P.Oxy. LXXVII 5105*, the «Apotheosis in hexameters» that portrays Poppaea as the devoted wife of an idealized Nero. After considering the work and attitudes of court intellectuals like Tiberius Claudius Balbillus and Chairemon of Alexandria, this paper suggests that the epigrammatist Leonides of Alexandria is the most plausible candidate for authorship. Last, it discusses why the text survived on a third-century papyrus codex at Oxyrhynchus.

KEYWORDS. *P.Oxy. LXXVII 5105*, apotheosis, Poppaea, Nero, Leonides of Alexandria, Roman Egypt.

1. *The text*

In 2011, the Swiss papyrologist Paul Schubert published in *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* a fragment of a papyrus codex written on both sides, and assigned it to the third century AD¹. The text, written in a small, informal hand was classified as «Apotheosis in hexameters». The *dramatis personae* are clear. The Roman emperor Nero is explicitly mentioned four times (ll. 16, 21, 41, 71). The narrative begins

¹ *P.Oxy. LXVII 5105*. Oxford, Sackler Library, Papyrology Rooms 24 3B 70/D(c). MERTENS-PACK³ 1984.27= LDAB 140274. TRISMEGISTOS nr. 140274. A high-resolution image may be found on the Oxyrhynchus Papyri website, at the following address: <http://www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/POxy>. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at a Seminar at Università Statale, Milano. I thank the organisers Chiara Torre, Carla Castelli, Luigi Lehnus, Matteo Rossetti and Elena Langella for their feedback and discussion.

with a procession (1-10) featuring Maenads, Naiads, lynxes, Arimaspeans, gryphons, which recalls Dionysian representations. At the head of the group there is Aphrodite on her chariot, who arrives to the residence of a young woman (11-14), heavily pregnant (15-17). The goddess advises the woman that she will ascend to Heaven, where she will forever sit beside her children (18-22). Nero appears twice as the husband that the young wife was forced to leave (16, 21). The young woman greets him in a moving farewell speech (27-37) and then leaves for good (38-39). At this point the scene moves on to a cosmic context, as it shows the woman's ascension to heaven step by step. She passes besides sub-lunar celestial bodies (50-51), sees Moon and Sun (52-54), goes through the orbits of the planets Mercury, Venus, Jupiter and Saturn (54-56), arrives to the fixed stars (57) and reaches her destination, that is the residence of the gods, where she is welcomed by a musical concert (58-60). Sitting among the gods (62-64), she gladly assists to a stellar performance (67-68). After a further reference to Nero, her voyage continues towards the North Pole, whence she looks down and watches him (72-74). At this point the papyrus breaks off.

2. *The Historical Context*

As noted by Schubert in the *editio princeps*, there are some literary precedents of royal catasterisms, above all with reference to Ptolemaic queens, from Berenice I, the last wife of Ptolemy I Soter, to Arsinoe II, wife of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, to Berenice II, cousin and wife of Ptolemy III Euergetes I². In the case of *P.Oxy. LXXVII 5105*, however, the protagonist of the catasterism is not a Ptolemaic queen, but a Roman empress, wife of Nero, who died pregnant. Her

² Berenice I: Theocr. *Idyll.* 17. Arsinoe II: Callimachus Fr. 228 Pfeiffer. Berenice II: Callimachus *Aet.* Fr. 110 Pfeiffer. Cf. P.A. FRASER, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 197.

pregnancy has led scholars to identify her with little margin of error with Poppaea Sabina, whom Nero married in 62 after murdering his first wife Octavia. Poppaea herself died in 65, while pregnant of her second child. Her first daughter, Claudia, was born in 63, but died at four months³. In 66, both Poppaea and Claudia received a divine cult by the *Fratres Arvales*⁴. The reference in the text to two children by Nero, both dead (ll. 21-22 «your children for Nero / you will guard for eternity») further confirms the identification with Poppaea.

According to some sources, Poppaea died after Nero kicked her in the belly⁵. However, this type of uxoricide was a rhetorical commonplace that characterized a ruler as a tyrant⁶. Tacitus (*Ann.* XVI 21) declared that he was not certain on the circumstances of the death of Poppaea, and noted that many held that Nero poisoned her. Certainly, the tradition on the murder of Poppaea is later than Nero's own *damnatio memoriae* of 68. From Tacitus we learn that in 66 Nero gave Poppaea a public and solemn funeral, in which the woman was embalmed with foreign techniques, and was then deified as Poppaea Venus or Sabina Aphrodite:

corpus non igni abolitum, ut Romanus mos, sed regum externorum consuetudine differtur odoribus conditur tumuloque Iuliorum infertur. Ductae tamen publicae exequiae, laudavitque ipse apud rostra formam eius et quod divinae infantis parens fuisset aliaque fortunae munera pro virtutibus⁷.

³ Tac. *Ann.* XV 23.1-3.

⁴ J. SCHEID, *Commentarii fratrum Arvalium qui supersunt. Les copies épigraphiques des protocoles annuels de la Confrérie Arvale (21 av. - 304 ap. J.-C.)*, Roma, École française de Rome, Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma, 1998, no. 30 col. 1 cd 26-27.

⁵ Tac. *Ann.* XVI 6, Dio LXII 27.5, Suet. *Nero* 35.5.

⁶ Other examples of tyrannical uxoricides: Her. III 32.4; Chariton, *Chaereas and Callirhoe* I 4.12; Diog. Laert. I 94 on Periander; Philostr. *VS* 555 on Herodes Atticus.

⁷ Tac. *Ann.* XVI 6.2.

«The body was not cremated in the Roman style, but, in conformity with the practice of foreign courts, was embalmed by stuffing with spices, then laid to rest in the mausoleum of the Julian family. Still, a public funeral was held; and the emperor at the Rostra eulogized her beauty, the fact that she had been the mother of an infant daughter now divine, and other favours of fortune which did duty for virtues»⁸.

In 66 Nero ordered a *heroon* to be erected to Poppaea as *thea Aphrodite*, goddess of marital love. As Dio reports, the temple was completed in 68; the historian even reports *verbatim* the dedicatory inscription of the temple, offered by the married women (γυναικες), which he probably read in a document, since at the time when he was writing, the temple or the inscription had been destroyed⁹.

The papyrus fragment confirms the importance of Ptolemaic precedents and Egyptian religion as models for Nero when organizing his wife's funeral. The analogies between Poppaea's apotheosis and the catasterisms of earlier Ptolemaic queens are the focus of a recent study by Caitlin Gillespie¹⁰. We also know from various sources that Poppaea was passionate for Egyptian astrology. Tacitus informs us that Poppaea surrounded herself of *mathematici* or astrologers, «the worst possible instruments to be used in imperial marriage».

⁸ Translation by J. Jackson, Loeb Classical Library.

⁹ Dio LXIII 26.3. For the hypothesis that Dio read the dedication of the temple to Poppaea in the proceedings of the senate, see C. LETTA, *Fonti scritte non letterarie nella Storia romana di Cassio Dione*, «SCO» 62, 2016, pp. 245-296.

¹⁰ On the funeral of Poppaea as a foreign-style ceremony, see Tac. *Ann.* XVI 6.2. On the deification as Poppaea Venus or Sabina Aphrodite in 66, Dio LXIII 26.3. On Poppaea's devotion to Venus, Sen. *Octavia* 694-697. Cf. F. H. CRAMER, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics*, Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1954 [reprinted in 2011], pp. 128-30. On the analogies between the *Apotheosis of Poppaea* and Ptolemaic precedents, C. GILLESPIE, *Poppaea Venus and the Ptolemaic Queens: an Alternative Biography*, «Histos» 8, 2014, pp. 122-145.

that is, a means to seduce Nero, something that she achieved in 58¹¹. Josephus even defined Poppaea θεοσεβής, «god-fearer», a term which has induced some scholars to think that the empress was sympathetic towards Judaism. However, it is now commonly agreed by scholars that, in the context of Nero's Rome, the term should probably be taken as the indicator of an eclectic religiosity, in a period when Egyptian and Jewish cults were often confused and conflated¹².

The oddest fact is, obviously, that the *Apotheosis* describes both Nero and Poppaea in the best possible terms, as an ideal couple, a symbol of married love, which looks like a curious survival to the *damnatio* of 68, and raises important questions on the possible date of composition. One hypothesis is that the *Apotheosis* was written soon after the death of Poppaea in 65 and before that of Nero in 68, and was then copied in an Egyptian context, away from the checks of the censorship. Alternatively, it might have been a rhetorical exercise on the theme in vogue in the third century. In my opinion, the

¹¹ *Hist. I 22 multos secreta Poppeae mathematicos, pessimum principalis matrimonii instrumentum, habuerant.* The phrase μαθηματικὴ ἐπιστήμη meant astronomy/astrology, as in Philo, *Opif. mundi* 128; cf. also Thessalos of Tralles, *prol.*, on whom see J. SCARBOROUGH, *Thessalos of Tralleis*, in P.T. KEYSER - G.L. IRBY-MASSIE (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Ancient Natural Scientists: The Greek Tradition and Its Many Heirs*, London - New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 804-5.

¹² *Jos. Ant. XX 195.* The θεοσεβεία of Poppaea should be interpreted as an eclectic religiosity rather than as Jewish faith *stricto sensu*, according to E.M. SMALLWOOD, *The alleged Jewish Tendencies of Poppaea Sabina*, «JThS» 10, 1959, pp. 329-35. Discussion on this controversial theme may be found in M.H. WILLIAMS, *Theosebes gar en - The Jewish Tendencies of Poppaea Sabina*, «JThS» 39, 1988, pp. 97-111, as well as in the most recent biographical studies of Poppaea, by F. HOLZTRATTNER, *Poppaea Neronis Potens. Die Gestalt der Poppaea Sabina in den Nerobüchern des Tacitus*, Graz, F. Berger u. Söhne, 1995, pp. 19-21. and by E.A. HEMELRIJK, *Matrona docta. Educated Women in the Roman élite from Cornelia to Julia Domna*, London - New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 299 n. 78. Recently, T. GRULL and L. BENKE, *A Hebrew / Aramaic Graffito and Poppaea's Alleged Jewish Sympathies*, «JJS» 62, 1999, pp. 37-55, have tried to revive the theory of a philo-Judaic Poppaea, on the basis of the recent discovery of a Jewish graffito on the site of the alleged villa of Poppaea at Oplontis.

first hypothesis is the most probable, as any author after 68 would have avoided an explicit praise of either Nero or Poppaea: as Suetonius notes (*Nero* 57), few people after the death of Nero defended his memory. Moreover, the praise of Poppaea and the partisan hope for Nero that characterize this text seem to presuppose an audience that had a living memory of the empress¹³. Last, the survival of the praise of Nero and Poppaea on an Egyptian papyrus could be connected to the preparations of an imperial visit to Egypt, a visit that never took place. In both 64 and 65 Nero and Poppaea planned to visit Egypt, and in 67 Nero again wanted to go there; none of these visits ever took place. It is interesting that Alexandrian coinage of 64/65 shows a crowned Nero on one side, and either Serapis or Poppaea on the obverse, a sign, perhaps, of the preparations that had been made to welcome the imperial couple¹⁴. The apotheosis could be one of the many documented manifestations of loyalty to Nero offered by Alexandria after 65, and in preparation of his expected arrival.

3. A Greek «*consolatio ad Neronem*»?

In ll. 17-27, Aphrodite consoles Poppaea, who is desperate for losing Nero. The text is striking for its lachrymose tone:

(...) γόου δ' [ἐ]νεχεύατο λήθ[ην]
 καὶ φ[λ]άτο "τέκνον, ἄδακρυς ἐ[πε]ίγει παντί σε θυμ[ῶ]ι
 προσδέχ[ε]τ' αἰ' Διὸς ἄστρα καθιδρύετα[ί] 'τε' σελ[ή]νην
 20]νος ἔνθεν ἄνακτι πο[.... τ]εὔχε δὲ Μοῖρ[α]

¹³ For GILLESPIE, *Poppaea Venus* cit., p. 141 «the power of the poetic narrative and its laudatory characterization of Poppaea would have been strongest for an audience with a living memory of the empress».

¹⁴ See E. CHRISTIANSEN, *The Roman Coins of Alexandria: Quantitative Studies: Nero, Trajan, Septimius Severus*, 2 Vols., Aarhus, Aarhus University Press, 1988, Vol. I, pp. 47-51, 60, 67-60, 77, Vol. II p. 100 on the coinage minted at Alexandria in honour of Nero and Poppaea.

-οτιέρην σε, μάκαιρα, γάμου [.. τέ]κνα Νέρωνι
] . ους αιώνας. .ου [.] φυλάξεις”,
 ὡς φα]μένη χερὸς ἦγε κατηφέα μηδὲ δοθέντι
] ιανθείσαν· ἔλειπε γὰρ ἴσον ἀκοίτην
 25 ἀθανάτ]ρις, ἀδινὸν δὲ πόθῳ στένεν· εἶπε δ’ ἐπ’ ἄκρων
 στᾶσα δ]όμων πύματόν τε, χαρίζετο δ’ ἀμφὶ μελάθροισ·
]ν οὐκ ἐβάρυνα, πόσι, θρόνον, εἰ σ’ ἐφύλαξα [

«She (Aphrodite) instilled oblivion of wailing and said: “My child, stop crying and hurry up: with all their heart Zeus’ stars welcome you and establish you on the moon whence ... ruler. Fate has made you more ... than marriage, you blessed one; you children for Nero you will guard for eternity ...” Having thus spoken, (Aphrodite) led her by her hand; she was downcast and did not rejoice in the offered (favour). For she was leaving her husband, (a man) equal to the gods, and she moaned loudly from her longing. Standing on the rooftop, she spoke her last words, and brought pleasure about the house: “I did not burden ... the throne, my husband, if I protected you ...” »¹⁵.

The atmosphere of cosmic *sympatheia*, the tearful tone, the presentation of Poppaea as devoted wife and ideal mother make sense if we regard this text as an official consolation where astronomy and flattery complement each other¹⁶. All suggests that the *Apotheosis of Poppaea* is probably nothing else but a Greek *consolatio ad Neronem* written soon after the death of the empress¹⁷. The analogy between the interstellar voyage of Poppaea and the voyage of Marcia at birth

¹⁵ For both text and translation I have followed the *editio princeps*.

¹⁶ Sen. *Ad Marciam* 18.1-3. Cf. CRAMER, *Astrology* cit., pp. 117-118.

¹⁷ On the genre of the catasterism or apotheosis as closely related and complementary to the *consolatio*, with specific reference to the death and deification of Claudia Augusta, cf. G. MCINTYRE, *Deification as Consolation: The Divine Children of the Roman Imperial Family*, «Historia» 62, 2013, pp. 222-240.

described by Seneca suggests that it was a fashionable theme at court.

*videbis illic innumerabiles stellas diverse micare, uno sidere omnia impleri. Videbis solem cotidiano cursu diei noctisque spatia signantem, annuo aestates hiemesque aequali vice dividentem. Videbis nocturnam lunae successionem, a fraternis occursibus lene remissumque lumen mutantem et modo occultam, modo toto ore terris imminentem, accessionibus damnisque mutabilem, semper proximae dissimilem. Videbis quinque sidera diversas agentia vias et in contrarium praecipiti mundo nitentia: ex horum levissimis motibus fortunas populorum dependent et maxima ac minima proinde formantur, prout aequum ini-
quumque sidus incessit. Miraberis collecta nubila et cadentes aquas et obliqua fulmina et caeli fragorem*¹⁸.

«You will see there the gleaming of countless stars, you will see one star flooding everything with his light – the sun that marks off the spaces of day and night in his daily course, and in his annual course distributes even more equably the periods of summer and winter. You will see the moon taking his place by night, who as she meets her brother borrows from him a pale, reflected light, now quite hidden, now overhanging the earth with her whole face exposed, ever changing as she waxes and wanes, ever different from her last appearance. You will see the five planets pursuing their different courses and striving to stem the headlong whirl of heaven; on even the slightest motions of these hang the fortunes of nations, and the greatest and smallest happenings are shaped to accord with the progress of a kindly or unkindly star. You will wonder at the piled-up clouds and the falling waters and the zigzag lightning and the roar of heaven»¹⁹.

The reference in the *Apotheosis* to «meteors stand with the short-lived shooting star /where (there are?) jar-shaped comets» (ll. 50-51) seems to compare the sudden death of Poppaea to a short-lived falling star, and the neighbouring comets emerge in this case as bad omens for the imperial court. These details presuppose a good level of astronomical knowledge, which takes us to the scientific circles at

¹⁸ Sen. *Ad Marciam* 18.2-3.

¹⁹ Translation by J. W. BASORE, Loeb Classical Library.

the court of Nero. Three names immediately spring to mind: Tiberius Claudius Balbillus, Chaeremon of Alexandria, Leonides of Alexandria. Another astrologer favoured by Poppaea, Ptolemy Seleucus, seems less likely as candidate, as Nero forced him to leave Rome soon after the death of Poppaea, to reach his former master Otho in Lusitania²⁰. Of the Egyptian astrologer Anoubion, author of a hexametrical poem, recently studied by Dirk Obbink in *P.Oxy.* LXVI, we lack the precise chronology. Finally, to explain the most difficult point, the reasons for the survival of the text on a third-century papyrus, the putative author should meet two further criteria: long-lasting popularity, and strong connection with Egypt.

4. *Tiberius Claudius Balbillus*

Tiberius Claudius Balbillus (ca. 10-79) wrote among other works *Astrologoumena* and *On the time of Death* for Hermogenes, a common friend of Seneca. Tiberius Claudius Balbillus (latinization of Barbillus) was the son of Tiberius' court astrologer Tiberius Claudius Thrasyllus, originally from Ephesus, but with strong connections in Alexandria. Balbillus was a childhood friend of Claudius. In the *Letter of Claudius to the Alexandrians* of 41, the emperor calls Balbillus, chief of the delegation, «my most esteemed friend» (l. 36) and «my companion» (l. 105). Two inscriptions from Ephesus preserve his career:

To the procurator of Asia and of the temples of Divus Augustus [and of the Great Serapis] and of the altars and sacred groves that are in Alexandria and

²⁰ On Ptolemy Seleucus, cf. the negative judgement by Tac. *Hist.* I 22 who regards Ptolemy as *potentibus infidum, sperantibus fallax*; II 78; Suet. *Otho* 4.1; 6.1; Plut. *Galba* 23.4; Juvenal VI 557-559. On Ptolemy Seleucus in Lusitania, Tac. *Hist.* I 22; Suet. *Otho* 4.1.

²¹ On Hermogenes as a friend of Seneca, see the Latin epigram *Poet. Lat. Min.*, IV 72 no. 38.

all Egypt and in charge of the Museum and of the Alexandrian libraries and high priest also of Hermes Alexandrian for ... years, and in charge of delegations and of Greek imperial responses of Divus Claudius²².

It is likely that Balbillus held an official religious function in Alexandria: Hans-Georg Pflaum and Fergus Millar were both convinced that Balbillus was the head of the imperial cult in Egypt²³. According to Tacitus, Balbillus had prophesized the reign to Nero, who in 55 made him prefect of Egypt to repay him²⁴. An Egyptian document that welcomes the accession of Nero as a cosmic event sounds like a passage from an official decree, perhaps of Balbillus, at the beginning of his prefectureship²⁵.

ὁ μὲν ὀφειλόμενος | τοῖς προγόνοις καὶ ἐν|φανῆς θεὸς Καῖσαρ εἰς
| αὐτοὺς κευώρηκε, | ὁ δὲ τῆς οἰκουμένης | καὶ προσδοκηθεὶς καὶ
ἐλπισ|θεὶς Αὐτοκράτωρ ἀποδέ|δεικται, ἀγαθὸς | δαίμων δὲ τῆς |
οἰκουμένης [ἀρ]χὴ ὧν | [[με]γισ|] τε πάντων | ἀγαθῶν Νέρων |

²² [*proc(uratori) Asiae et] aedium diui Augusti et [magni Serapidis e]t lucorum sacro[rumque omnium qu]ae sunt Alexan[dreae et in tota Aegypt]o et supra Mu[s]eu[m] e[]t ab Alexandri]na bybliothece et archi[erei et ad Herm]en Alexandreon pe[r annos ...] et ad legationes et ad res[pon]sa Graeca? Ca]esaris Augusti diui Claud[i] e[]t trib[un]os mili[um] le[g]ionis XX et praef[ecto] fabrum diui Claudi. The inscription was published by J. KEIL in 1923: *AE* 1924, no. 78. H.-G. PFLAUM, *Les carrières procuratoriennes équestres sous le haut-empire romain*, Paris, P. Geuthner, 1960, Vol. I, p. 1086 no. 15; E.M. SMALLWOOD, *Documents illustrating the Principates of Gaius, Claudius and Nero*, Cambridge, CUP, 1967, no. 261 (a); cf. also 261 (b), a Greek dedication to Balbillus «on behalf of his magnanimity and the benefactions towards the city [sc. Ephesus]» = *Inscriften von Ephesus* VII 3042.*

²³ PFLAUM, *Carrières* cit., Vol. I, p. 1086 n. 15, 134-41; F.G.B. MILLAR, *The Emperor in the Roman World*, London, 1992, pp. 77 and 86.

²⁴ Prophecy of Balbillus on the reign of Nero: Tac. *Ann.* VI 22; cf. *Ann.* IX 15, where he is not mentioned by name. «Tiberius Balbillus» prefect of Egypt: *Ann.* XIII 22.1. Documentation on Balbillus: G. BASTIANINI, *Lista dei prefetti d'Egitto dal 30^a al 299^a*, «ZPE» 17, 1975, pp. 263-328, on p. 273.

²⁵ A parallel text celebrating the accession of Hadrian was produced by Hadrian's new prefect Rammius Martialis: *P.Oxy.* LV 3781 of 117.

Καῖσαρ ἀποδέδεικται. | διὸ πάντες ὀφείλομεν | στεφανηφοροῦντες
| καὶ βουθυτοῦντες | θεοῖς πᾶσι εἰδέναι | χάριτας. (ἔτους) α
Νέρωνος | Κλαυδίου Καίσαρος Σεβαστοῦ Γερμανικοῦ | μη(νός)
Νέ(ου) Σεβ(αστοῦ) κα²⁶.

The Caesar who was owed to his ancestors, god manifest, has gone to join them, and the Emperor whom the world expected and hoped for has been proclaimed, the good genius of the world and source of all blessings, Nero Caesar, has been proclaimed. Therefore, ought we all wearing garlands and with sacrifices of oxen to give thanks to all the gods. The 1st year of Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, the 21st of the month Neos Sebastos (= Hathyr 21, November 17, 54)²⁷.

In the document, the apotheosis of Claudius is devoted a strikingly limited space; the defunct emperor is dismissed in a few lines, to give space to the praise of Nero in a cosmic-astrological context as the «hope of the universe» and the ἀγαθὸς δαίμων. Seneca famously praised Balbillus as *virorum optimus perfectusque in omni litterarum genere rarissime*, but the compliment did not bring him good luck²⁸. Both Claudius and Nero in fact consulted Balbillus as court astrologer on the significance of various comets that had appeared during their reigns. According to Suetonius, after interpreting a comet as a favourable omen in 60, when a comet appeared in 64 Balbillus advised the emperor to get rid of some nobles to avert the wrath of the gods, claiming that this was the custom of the kings, to be probably interpreted as the Ptolemies²⁹. The passage empha-

²⁶ P.Oxy. VII 1021 = *Chr.W.* 113, *Sel.Pap.* II 235, *C.Pap.Hengstl* 10. Cf. A. HARKER, *Loyalty and Dissidence in Roman Egypt. The Case of the Acta Alexandrinorum*, Cambridge, CUP, 2008, pp. 51 and 200, with earlier bibliography.

²⁷ Translation by A. S. Hunt, Loeb Classical Library.

²⁸ Sen. *Nat. quaest.* IV 2.13.

²⁹ On the intimacy of Claudius and Nero with Balbillus, cf. A. VIGOURT, *Les Présages impériaux d'Auguste à Domitien*, Paris, Boccard, 2001, pp. 458-459. On the comet of 64, Suet. *Nero* 36.1. Tacitus (*Ann.* XV 47) refers these events to the end of 64: *Fine anni vulgantur prodigia, imminentium malorum nuntia. Vis fulgurum non alias crebrior, et sidus cometes, sanguine inlustri semper Neroni expiatum.*

sizes the expertise of Balbillus as astrologer. These skills certainly helped him to preserve his fortune even after the death of Nero, when we find him at the side of Vespasian, untouched by an official expulsion of astrologers. He must have died little before Vespasian, as in 79 the emperor granted the citizens of Ephesus permission to institute international games called *Balbilleia*, documented until the end of the third century³⁰. If Balbillus were the author of the *Apotheosis of Poppaea*, his lasting popularity and the presence of games in his honour were crucial for the survival of the text³¹. Some fragments of his work were preserved by Byzantine astrologers, but unfortunately, however, too little survives to allow for a comparative study³².

³⁰ Dio LXV 9.2. These games are documented on inscriptions as *Balbillea*, *Balbilleia*, or *Barbillea*. For a list of the epigraphical occurrences of the name, CRAMER, *Astrology* cit., p. 138 nn. 533-534.

³¹ Cf. the analysis by H.I. BELL, *The Economic crisis in Egypt under Nero*, «JRS» 28, 1938, pp. 1-8, of OGIS II 669, the edict of Tiberius Julius Alexander of 68, on which a full commentary was produced by G. CHALON, *L'Édit de Tiberius Julius Alexander*, Bibliotheca Helvetica Romana V, Olten, 1964. On Tiberius Julius Alexander and Nero, E.W. TURNER, *Tiberius Iulius Alexander*, «JRS» 44, 1954, pp. 54-64; M.P. CESARETTI, *Nerone e l'Egitto*, «Aegyptus» 64, 1984, pp. 3-25; O. MONTEVECCHI, *Il significato dell'età neroniana secondo i papiri greci d'Egitto*, in J.-M. CROISILLE - P.M. FAUCHÈRE (eds.), *Neronia 1977. Actes du 2^e colloque de la Société Internationale d'Études Néroniennes*, Clermont-Ferrand, 1982, pp. 41-54, reprinted in S. DARIS (ed.), *Orsolina Montevocchi. Scripta Selecta*, Milano, Vita & Pensiero, 1998, pp. 153-169.

³² On the *Astrologumena* of Balbillus, cf. the fragments preserved by the astrologer Psalchus in three Parisian Greek manuscripts: *Paris. gr.* 2425, f. 165 v; *Paris. gr.* 2524, f. 90; *Paris. gr.* 2506, f. 80. See CRAMER, *Astrology* cit., p. 127, and discussion by Balbillus of horoscopes, preserved in a Byzantine manuscript, CCAG VIII.4 (Brussels 1921) 236-23, by M. GANSTEN, *Balbillus and the Method of Aphesis*, «GRBS» 52, 2012, pp. 587-602. On comets and their political interpretations in the Roman Republican period, see F. SANTANGELO, *Divination, Prediction and the Fall of the Roman Republic*. Cambridge, CUP, 2013, especially Chapter 12.

5. Chaeremon of Alexandria

Another candidate is the Egyptian priest and Stoic philosopher Chaeremon of Alexandria, who was called to Rome to become the tutor of Nero, possibly around 49, along with Seneca and the peripatetic philosopher Alexander of Aigai. According to *Suda*, Chaeremon was a sacred scribe or ἱερογραμματεύς, and presided over the Alexandrian Museum in an unknown period probably before his stay in Rome. Chaeremon wrote an *Egyptian History* that Josephus accused of anti-Judaism, and treatises *On Hieroglyphs* and *On Comets*, of which we have a couple dozen fragments³³. He is probably the Chaeremon son of Leonides who features as delegate in the *Letter of Claudius* of 41 (P.Lond. 6.1912 = CPJ 2.153). Chaeremon was certainly at Rome until 65, at a time when another Stoic philosopher, Annaeus Cornutus from Leptis Magna, taught. Cornutus presents many analogies with Chaeremon, e.g. for his inclination to interpret Greek mythology allegorically, and to link the deities of the Greek pantheon with the natural elements of Stoic physics³⁴. Both van der Horst and Ilaria Ramelli hypothesized that Chaeremon left Rome for Egypt in his old age, after 65, when Cornutus was banished and Seneca and Lucan were forced to commit suicide³⁵. However, the date of the exile of Cornutus is far from certain. Chaeremon

³³ Chaeremon: FGH 618 (F. JACOBY), BNJ 618 (P. T. KEYSER, Chairemon (618). *Brill's New Jacoby*. Editor in Chief: Ian Worthington (University of Missouri). Brill Online, 2016; P. W. VAN DER HORST, *Chaeremon: Egyptian Priest and Stoic Philosopher*, Leiden, Brill, 1984; M. FREDE, *Chaeremon der Stoiker*, «ANRW» 2.36.3, 1989, pp. 2067-2103; M. SWETNAM-BURLAND, *Egyptian priests in Roman Italy*, in E. GRUEN (ed.), *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean. Issues and Debates*, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2011, pp. 336-353.

³⁴ On Cornutus cf. I. RAMELLI, *Anneo Cornuto e gli Stoici romani*, «Gerión» 21, 2003, pp. 283-303, including earlier literature. For a more general treatment of Cornutus in the context of Stoic literature, I. RAMELLI (ed.), *Stoici romani minori*, Milano, Bompiani, 2008, pp. 1311-59 and pp. 1299-1309.

³⁵ VAN DER HORST, *Chaeremon* cit., p. 9.

was the most trusted Egyptian at the court of Nero, as he had been his tutor; and was actually the only tutor alive by the time Poppaea died. In his capacity of royal tutor, he would be perfect in the role of consoler. As Areius of Alexandria, teacher of Augustus, consoled Livia on the death of Drusus in 9 BC, with a speech quoted by Seneca in his consolation *ad Marciam* (4.2-5.6), similarly Chaeremon may have consoled his pupil on the death of Poppaea. The role of the intellectual as priest, royal tutor, head of the Alexandrian library, and mentor of the king is a *topos* of Ptolemaic derivation, that lasted throughout the Roman imperial period.

Chaeremon and Cornutus are cited together by Porphyry, who states that they were popular among Christians, Chaeremon especially for his work on the ascetic life of Egyptian priests. Jerome described him as *vir eloquentissimus* and read his treatise on comets. It may seem strange that Christians read and appreciated a philosopher who had taught Nero, the persecutor of Christianity. The problem with Chaeremon is that there is no evidence that he wrote poetry. Besides, the tone and content of the *Apotheosis* seem too superficial to have been written by a priest and a philosopher.

6. *Leonides of Alexandria*

Leonides of Alexandria, epigrammatic poet and astronomer of Alexandria, worked in Rome under Claudius and Nero; at a certain point under Nero, probably in the latter part of his reign, he went back to Egypt and continued to send poems to the imperial family from there. Leonides was the author of an epigram for Poppaea in which he gave her a celestial globe (οὐράνιον μείμημα) as birthday present, praised her σοφία, to be intended as her passion for astronomy and mathematics, and called her Διὸς εὐνί «consort of Zeus», obviously referring to her marriage to Nero; in a later epigram he even mocked the folly of astrologers, certainly condemning

those who spoke against Nero³⁶. He sent epigrams as birthday gifts to Nero and to Agrippina, naturally remained a good friend of the emperor even after the killing of his mother, and even composed some epigrams on Medea the child-murderess, in probable juxtaposition to Nero's matricide³⁷. Leonides even gives us some autobiographical details: in an epigram (*AP* 9.344, Page *FGE* XXI p. 525), he says that, once an astrologer, he is now much more successful as a poet, having decided to swap Urania for Calliope: since then, he became πάντεσσιν ἐράσμιος, «everybody's darling». His astronomical competence seems very compatible with the cosmic setting of the *Apotheosis of Poppaea*, a poem explicitly written in honour of an empress who was addicted to astrology. Leonides himself had a passion for mathematics. He invented the application of the principle of isopsephism (an equal number resulting from each distich in a 4-line epigram) to the genre of the epigram. It is difficult to assess whether in the *Apotheosis* there could be traces of isopsephism, because the majority of the lines are incomplete, and different supplements and integrations would obviously alter the total significantly.

In an epigram, *AP* 6.328 (PAGE, *FGE* cit., n. VII), Leonides explicitly states that he sent the Third Book of his epigrams from Egypt to Rome as a δῶρον αἰοιδότατον, a «most tuneful gift» to Caesar, that is, the music-lover Nero. In *AP* 9.352 (PAGE, *FGE* cit., n. XXIX), Leonides sends an epigram from Egypt to Rome (the text is presented as an offering «from Nile to Tiber») to congratulate Nero on escape from danger, and mentions the public sacrifice in Egypt of 100 oxen to Zeus Uranius (often indentified with Nero himself) to celebrate the emperor's safety. The episode could match what we

³⁶ *AP* 9.355 = D.L. PAGE, *Further Greek Epigrams: Epigrams before A.D. 50 from the Greek Anthology and other sources, not included in 'Hellenistic epigrams' or in the 'Garland of Philip'*, Cambridge, CUP, 1981 [= *FGE*], pp. 535-6 n. XXXII. On the folly of astrologers: *AP* 9.80 (Page *FGE* cit., no. XIX).

³⁷ Epigrams as birthday gifts to Nero: *AP* 6.321 (Page *FGE* cit., n. I); birthday present to Agrippina: *AP* 9.355 (Page *FGE* cit, n. VIII). On Medea: *AP* 9.345, 346 (Page *FGE* cit., nos. XXII, XXIII).

know of the celebrations for Nero's escape from the Pisonian conspiracy of 65: in *Annals* XV.71, Tacitus reports that, on that occasion, the Capitol swarmed with victims (*compleri ... Capitolium victimis*). This detail carries potential implications as far as the *Apotheosis of Poppaea* is concerned. In fact, the *Leitmotiv* in the poem seems to be the protection granted by the defunct Poppaea to Nero from imminent dangers. Nero is presented as someone who needs to be protected, probably because he has just escaped a serious danger, but also because it was clear to everybody that he was bound to be in trouble again. Leonides's work matches the *Apotheosis* in many respects: one is the taste for the sepulchral setting and the theme of the immature death of children. Leonides authored sepulchral epigrams, whose common theme was parents outliving their children: see for instance *AP* 7.547, the epitaph for the daughter of Bianor (PAGE, *FGE* cit., n. IX), or *AP* 7.549 (PAGE, *FGE* cit., n. XI) on Niobe. In the *Apotheosis*, too, great space is devoted to the role of the dead children of Nero and Poppaea who meet their mother in Heaven, while Nero is depicted as a survivor, who will be protected by the defunct members of his family.

All these elements point to Leonides of Alexandria as the most plausible author of the text preserved by *P.Oxy.* LXXVII 5105. Leonides meets all criteria that we have previously identified: enduring popularity, connection with Egypt, courtesan tone, loyalty to Nero even after 66, presence in Egypt at the end of the reign of Nero. Even the criticism generally expressed by scholars on Leonides as a «contemptible trifler» and one who played the game of a «frivolous ingenuity» perfectly matches the style of the *Apotheosis of Poppaea*, too formal and occasional to have been written by either the wise politician Balbillus or the ascetic philosopher Chaereon, and much more appropriate to a frivolous court poet³⁸. The fortune of the epigrams shows that Leonides' works were copied in late an-

³⁸ PAGE, *FGE* cit., pp. 504-5.*

tiquity and beyond, at least in Egypt, where he must have been a local glory. The survival of our text on a third-century papyrus codex must thus be explained as a consequence of the personal fame of Leonides in Alexandria and throughout Egypt, regardless of the actual content of the fragment. Some of Leonides' epigrams found their way in the *Palatine Anthology*, which informs us that he composed other works for Caesar, besides the epigrams themselves. Why the *Apotheosis of Poppaea* escaped later Byzantine collections, may be answered easily: the explicit praise of both Poppaea and Nero, highly negative figures for Christianity, must have prevented the text from being copied on a wider scale in Byzantine times. Notwithstanding this, a comparative study of the so-called *Apotheosis of Poppaea* and the style of the surviving work by Leonides of Alexandria remains an open field and a *desideratum* for future philological research.

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