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HISTORY AND THE DATE OF CALPURNIUS SICULUS

In 1978 I published an article which argued that the poet Calpurnius Siculus wrote his seven eclogues not in the reign of Nero but in that of Severus Alexander. According to my most recent critic, T. P. Wiseman, this “was refuted in 1980 by G. B. Townend on historical grounds – notably the *munus* and the amphitheatre of *Eclogue* 7 – and by Roland Mayer on the grounds of prosody and literary reminiscence”¹. However, at least two standard authorities to which all English-speaking students will turn, one literary and one historical, while expressing little confidence in my effort, seem to believe that the debate is still open². So let us continue.

I share with my critics one piece of common ground: after careful reading of the arguments I can see no reason for changing my previous conviction. I have nothing to say about those of Mayer. In the paper accompanying this, Professor Armstrong has exhaustively demonstrated their precise value³. The views of Professors Townend and Wiseman are more worthy of reflection. I begin by summarizing the position of my original article, which fell into two clear parts: first, that the eclogues of Calpurnius can not have been written in the early years of Nero’s reign; and second, that if not Neronian they fit best in the early years of Severus Alexander, some 170 years later. With regard to the latter, Townend allowed that, in the (impossible) event that Calpurnius Siculus was not early Neronian, I had “probably chosen, in the reign of Alexander Severus, the only other period for which any sort of case might be made”. Since we agree on the alternatives, the debate must centre on Nero. I shall ignore here weaknesses in the case both for and against Alexander (there can of course be no formal disproof). I shall likewise ignore Armstrong’s clear demonstration that any Neronian poet, whatever his quality, would have had difficulty in understanding Calpurnius’ language and literary allusions. And I shall ignore the great bulk of purely circumstantial evidence in the poems for and against Nero or Alexander, though I must emphasize how much of the case for Nero is based on possible elucidation of obscure historical allusions. Thus, as the connoisseur of Calpurnius

¹ E. Champlin, *The life and times of Calpurnius Siculus*, *JRS* 68 (1978), 95–110; G. B. Townend, *Calpurnius Siculus and the munus Neronis*, *JRS* 70 (1980), 166–174; R. Mayer, *Calpurnius Siculus: technique and date*, *JRS* 70 (1980), 175–176; T. P. Wiseman, *Calpurnius Siculus and the Claudian civil war*, *JRS* 72 (1982), 57–67.

² F. R. D. Goodyear, in the *Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. II, *Latin Literature* (Cambridge 1982), 626ff.; H. H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*⁵ (London 1982), 481 n. 7b.

³ D. Armstrong, *Stylistics and the date of Calpurnius Siculus*, below, 113–136.

will know, two of the prime indicators of Nero are *maternis Iulis* and recent *civilia bella*; Townend and Wiseman agree that these point to Nero, but each interprets them differently. Can both be right? Having already played the allusion game myself, I see no reason to carry it on here. Instead I want to concentrate on what everyone will agree are the twin pillars of a Neronian date, all else being mere confirmation: first, that *Eclogue* 1 was written in late 54 and “represents in verse Nero’s programme for the first year”⁴; and second, that *Eclogue* 7 was written in or soon after 57 and celebrates both the construction of a wooden amphitheatre in the Campus Martius and (Townend’s signal contribution) a *gladiatorium munus* held there in that year. If these two poems are not early Neronian, they are nothing, that is there is no reason to see them or any of the eclogues as Neronian at all, and the allusions seen to contemporary events will have to be explained otherwise. There are four reasons for divorcing them from this period.

1. The emperor Claudius died 13 October, A.D. 54. In that year a comet visible in June and early July was taken (after the event at least) to be an omen of his death⁵. Calpurnius mentions just such a significant comet at 1. 77–83. Pliny (who must have seen it) calls it *terrificum sidus*, whereas (as Garnett pointed out) Calpurnius emphasizes the mildness and perfection of his comet: no matter, since one could call on poetic license, or different points of view⁶. However, I must continue to insist on the complicated but precise time-frame provided by the poet in *Eclogue* 1. Two shepherds retreat for coolness to a sacred grove, read a prophecy written there, and prepare to carry the news to the emperor. First, *nondum solis equos declinis mitigat aestas*, the declining summer (or summer heat) does not yet tame the horses of the sun. One can interpret this as one wishes, but the surface meaning is that we are in summertime. As lines 2 and 3 make clear, the vintage is in progress. Postgate, although a convinced Neronian, drew the obvious conclusion from a glance at Columella: “the language used clearly assigns the date to, at latest, a day in early September.”⁷ Second, to escape the heat the shepherds enter the grove of Faunus. There they find carved into a beech tree a prophecy by the god himself which celebrates the advent of a new golden age (lines 33–88). The poet lays great stress on how very recent the carving is:

*sed quaenam sacra descripta est pagina fago,
quam modo nescio quis properanti falce notavit?
aspicis ut virides etiam nunc littera rimas
servet et arenti nondum se laxet hiatu? (1.20–23)*

⁴ A. Momigliano, *Literary chronology of the Neronian age*, *CQ* 38 (1944), 96–100 = his *Secondo contributo alla storia degli studi classici* (Roma 1960), 454–461, which is the version I have used.

⁵ Cf. Townend, 168.

⁶ However, pace J. P. Postgate, *CR* 16 (1902), 39–40, there can be no doubt that Pliny 2.92 cites this particular Claudian comet as a *sidus terrificum*.

⁷ Postgate, *ibid.*

That is, the date of this poem-within-a-poem, the prophecy, is shortly before that of the poem itself. It refers to a comet seen for the last twenty days (77 ff.). To follow Postgate again, "it must then have been seen in Italy for some time before the end of August". I do not see how the dramatic time scheme could be more explicit. The poet says (let us leave reality aside for the moment) that the shepherds entered the grove in a hot September, and that there they found a very recent inscription, mentioning a contemporary comet, and prophesying great things for a new emperor. How can a new emperor in September preceded by a comet no earlier than August be reconciled with a Nero acceding in mid-October and a comet visible from approximately 9 June to 9 July?

This can of course all be explained away. According to Townend (p. 168), "the poem simply lacks a clear 'dramatic date', with a careful confusion of the relative dates of the carving of the inscription, its reading by the shepherds as they shelter from the heat (lines 6–7) and the point at which the new Augustus (although the succession is not made explicit) ascends the throne. Such poetical playing with dates is entirely plausible." The playing with dates does not exist. Townend must play with dates himself, as he later repeats "by the end of the poem (94) the new emperor has ascended the throne". Nowhere in the poem or the prophecy is there any indication that the new emperor is not already on the throne: that reading must be imported by the Neronians who wish to equate this comet with the one that preceded Claudius' death, whereas the prophecy is simply forecasting the wonders of a new reign already begun. Moreover, pace Townend there is a conflict between Seneca, *Apoc.* 2.1, and Calpurnius, and a problem with the weather: Calpurnius' weather for the accession-date is simply incompatible with Seneca's account⁸. If Calpurnius was trying to fudge the date he did it in the boldest manner possible, by being specifically inaccurate.

2. In his stylistic analysis, many other points aside, Professor Armstrong has shown as clearly as possible that *Eclogue* 1 reflects the prologue to Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. There should be no doubt that Calpurnius is building on Lucan (and not vice versa), and so specific is the relationship that there can be no appeal to other authors, even lost ones, for parallel or precedent. The stylistic

⁸ Townend, 168 n. 13: "J. P. Postgate, *CR* xvi (1902), 38–40, effectively dealt with all these problems." If the problems are those alluded to in the sentence to which n. 13 is attached, Postgate does not even mention them. I repeat: how do we reconcile *Eclogue* 1.1 and the terrific heat during the vintage with Seneca's

*iam Phoebus brevior via contraxerat ortum
lucis et obscuri crescebant tempora somni,
iamque suum victrix augebat Cynthia regnum
et deformis hiemps gratos carpebat honores
divitis autumni, iussoque senescere Baccho
carpebat raras serus vindemitor uvas.*

Puto magis intellegi, si dixerō: mensis erat October, dies III. Idus Octobris. (Apocolocyntosis 2)?

argument is of course a historical one here: if one accepts it, *Eclogue* 1 can not possibly have been written anywhere near A.D. 54.

3. In 57 Nero built a wooden amphitheatre in the Campus Martius: Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.31.1, and Suetonius (*Nero* 12.1, without the date) tell us so. This he inaugurated, it appears, with a *gladiatorium munus* (Suetonius 12.1, cf. 11.1) and Professor Townend has argued at length that both amphitheatre and games are precisely what we find in *Eclogue* 7. Again, I shall ignore circumstantial evidence. One may make what one wants of late and conflicting legends about Simon Magus and his wooden tower, and attempts to locate the amphitheatre from them (p. 170); and one can decide for oneself whether the amber "knotting the protective nets in Pliny" and used at the *munus* is to be juxtaposed with the *auro torta retia* of Calpurnius (172f.). What is difficult to understand is what precisely the *gladiatorium munus* of 57 was, and how one can possibly claim that "the details given by Calpurnius belong unmistakably to the same occasion". Since, as Wiseman suggested, the *munus* and the amphitheatre are Townend's main historical grounds for refuting my contention, they should be re-examined.

As Townend rightly says, "Suetonius in the *divisio* which opens his list of Nero's *spectacula* (*Nero* 11.1), mentions a *gladiatorium munus*", which is the last in his list of spectacles. After discussing the other *genera* in turn, he comes to the *munus* (12.1). I quote Townend's paraphrase of the passage:

... an extensive section introduced by the key-word *munere* and then subdivided into sentences giving the main elements of the show, with the general note that it took place in the wooden amphitheatre and that nobody was killed. These elements are: (1) senators and equestrians fighting in the arena and acting as 'confectores ferarum et varia harenae ministeria'; (2) a *naumachia*, in sea-water with sea-creatures swimming in it; (3) a series of *pyrrhicae*, including the story of Pasiphae and the bull ... and that of Icarus ... (p. 170)

This same *munus* may be the one recorded by Pliny (*NH* 37.45) and by the epitome of Dio (61.9.5), but it is ignored by Tacitus, according to Townend because he was "selecting events carefully to illustrate his picture of the emperor's increasing disgrace". Clear though this reconstruction may be, let us look at some aspects of it yet again.

Of the last in his list of Nero's spectacles Suetonius records the following: *munere, quod in amphitheatro ligneo regione Martii campi intra anni spatium fabricato dedit, neminem occidit, ne noxiorum quidem*. Of Suetonius it has rightly been observed "The writer seldom bothers to spell out the subject of each section as it comes up, so that it is easy to miss the transition from one section of the theme to the next"⁹. Here one can see a break, if one likes, the end of the four kinds of *spectacula* followed by supernumerary material: *exhibuit autem ... exhibuit et ...* (12.3) *instituit et ...* A natural progression of thought leads from the *gladiatorium munus* to notables in the arena, to the *naumachia*, to pyrrhic dances, to quinquennial games. Where does one item stop and the next start?

⁹ G. B. Townend, Suetonius, in: T. J. Luce, ed., *Ancient writers: Greece and Rome* (New York 1982), 1057.

First after the sentence on the *munus* are senators and equestrians fighting each other (?), managing the beasts in the arena, and performing related menial tasks. What Townend failed to mention were the figures. The text of Suetonius claims that no fewer than 400 senators and 600 knights took part. Between Augustus and Septimius Severus, the Roman senate comprised approximately 600 to 700 men¹⁰. Could anyone seriously believe that less than three years after his accession Nero, whose vices were still hidden, forced over half the Roman senate to scamper about the arena at one *munus*? The figures must surely represent an estimate of such incidents for the entire reign.

One can of course explain this away by saying that the figures are corrupt. If so, how many senators and knights took part? A lot? Some? A few? Here we cannot dismiss Tacitus as a mere literary artist. In A.D. 59 he reports of Nero: *notos quoque equites Romanos operas arenae promittere subegit donis ingentibus, nisi quod merces ab eo qui iubere potest vim necessitatis adfert.* (14.14.6). How do we reconcile bribes to some equestrian gladiators in 59 with mass compulsion of senators and knights in 57? Nor, as Townend omits to observe, is Tacitus the artiste alone. In A.D. 59 (again) Dio gives a long account of the scandal accompanying games held by Nero in his mother's honor (61.17): men and women, not just equestrian but senatorial in rank, appeared in the orchestra, at the circus, in the amphitheatre, playing the flute, dancing and acting, riding horses, killing beasts, and fighting each other, some willingly, some not. The spectacle was disgraceful and shocking. Men could reflect then (as Dio does at length) on the contrast between the proud families of republican Rome and their sad descendants. Now Tacitus and Dio are both writing annals, year by inevitable year. How could they be so shocked by events in 59 and completely ignore the horror endured by (1000?) senators and knights in 57? Literary purposes perhaps, the decline of Nero's character. But surely far more likely is a misreading by Townend of the very hard-headed Suetonius, the biographer by topics who lists and calculates. His account of the *munus* of 57 stops at the word *quidem*. The interest of the affair lay in the speed with which the amphitheatre was erected and the clemency shown to all of the fighters, winners and losers, which (one might add) was in keeping with the clemency of the new reign.

Once one severs the 400 senators from the *munus*, or at least waits for proof of their connection, one is free to continue. Next, *exhibuit et naumachiam marina aqua innantibus beluis*: almost certainly, indeed, the same show described by Dio under a year which might well be 57 (61.9.5), adding that the water was then drained off, and fights staged on the dried land. Now a *naumachia* is a mock sea-battle; on this occasion Dio tells us it represented the Persians versus the Athenians. Nero, one may presume, added sea water and sea beasts for the appropriate verisimilitude. But what has this to do with Calpurnius Siculus?

¹⁰ A standard estimate, which no one would dispute: the figures are discussed exhaustively by R. J. A. Talbert in his "The Senate of Imperial Rome" (Princeton 1984), 131 ff.

In *Eclogue* 7.23–72 we have the description of an occasion at the amphitheatre. First, the rustic observer marvels at its size and splendour, moving from this to a description of the *rotulus* and the *retia* meant to restrain the beasts, then (progressing) from line 57 *vidi genus omne ferarum*: hares, boar, elk, bulls (58–64) and not only these *silvestria* ... *monstra* but maritime creatures, seals, hippopotamuses, and then the following curious ending:

*a! trepidi quotiens sola discedentis harenae
vidimus in partes, ruptaque voragine terrae
emersisse feras; et in isdem saepe cavernis
aurea cum subito creverunt arbusta nimbo.* (7.69–72, Korzeniewski)

Thus the rustic sees land beasts and sea beasts, and ends with the beasts' entrance, from which trees¹¹ appear. Sea and land seem to be intermixed, but of course the rustic may be confused. He is certainly frightened, exaggeratedly so, for this is a remarkably quiet scene. Where in the midst of this natural wonder are the warships? Where for that matter are the *bestiarii* when there is work to be done? Those who would connect this scene with Nero in the year 57 must produce them, for it seems to have no connection with anything in Suetonius, however he be interpreted. There is no *gladiatorium munus* here: no *venatio* here (assumed by Townend, p. 171, 173), no senators, no knights, no gladiators, no *naumachia*, no pyrrhic dancers — just animals and trees. The poet might as well be a child on his first trip to the zoo.

It is quite obvious what Calpurnius is looking at, and there is nothing warlike or gladiatorial about it. He is watching a theatrical *spectaculum* in the amphitheatre, to be compared closely with a scene described by Martial as taking place in A.D. 80:

*quidquid in Orptheo Rhodope spectasse theatro
dicitur, exhibuit, Caesar, harena tibi.
repperunt scopuli mirandaque silva cucurrit,
quale fuisse nemus creditus Hesperidum.
adfuit immixtum pecori genus omne ferarum
et supra vatem multa pependit avis,
ipse sed ingrato iacuit laceratus ab urso.
Haec tantum res est facta παρ' ιστορίαν.* (*Epigrammaton Liber* 21)

Regardless of who is imitating whom, the poets are describing the same thing. Calpurnius' *vidi genus omne ferarum* (7.57) is by itself too weak a link to Martial's fifth line, but taken in connection with *Eclogue* 2.10–11 there should be no doubt that the two poets are thinking as one:

*adfuit omne genus pecudum, genus omne ferarum
et quodcumque vagis altum ferit aera pennis.*

¹¹ If Calpurnius is to be Neronian, should we not read *arbusta* in 72? for *arbusta* are always strawberries or their branches in classical Latin.

More importantly, the action described by Martial at lines 3 and 4 is precisely what Calpurnius describes at 7.70–72, the earth in the amphitheatre marvellously producing wondrous trees. Not just any trees: Martial is reminded of the *nemus Hesperidum*: Calpurnius specifies the *aurea arbuta*. *Aurea*, be it noted; for him it is the *nemus Hesperidum*. Which poet expands and builds on the other's idea is here irrelevant (though obvious). What Calpurnius is watching has nothing to do with the multiform entertainments assigned to Nero's *munus* of 57, however it be described and whatever we make of the evidence. There is no link here with A.D. 57.

4. One further point, raised neither by me nor by my critics, against dating *Eclogue* 7 to A.D. 57, was discussed briefly by Momigliano in his paper of 1944. Before him, H. de la Ville de Mirmont and K. Latte had independently argued, because of it, that *Eclogue* 7 must be dated to 63 or later. I quote his reply in full:

Their argument is very acute and deserves attention. In that year, 63, special seats were assigned to the knights *apud circum* (Tac. 15.32), and our shepherd describes *quaecumque patent sub aperto libera caelo/aut eques aut nivei loca densavere tribuni* (II 28–9). Yet common sense teaches that a regulation for privileged seats very often simply legalizes an existing practice. An appropriation of seats not enforced by law can be seen in any lecture room¹².

The words of Tacitus 15.32 are as follows: *equitum Romanorum locos sedilibus plebis anteposuit apud circum*: namque ad eam diem indiscreti inibant (in Church and Broadribb's translation: "for up to that time they used to enter in a promiscuous throng"), *quia lex Roscia nihil nisi de quattuordecim ordinibus sanxit*. Tacitus therefore, as Momigliano omitted to note, tells us the exact opposite. If Tacitus is correct, Calpurnius Siculus cannot have seen a throng of knights and military tribunes identifiable by their dress in the front rows at the circus before 63.

That Nero was remembered for setting aside places for the knights at the circus is clear: *circensibus locis equiti secreta a ceteris tribuit* (Suetonius, *Nero* 11.1), cf. *quos (sc. euripos) Nero princeps sustulit equiti loca addens* (Pliny, *NH* 8.21). This follows naturally on Claudius' act of setting aside places for senators at the circus in 41 (Suetonius, *Claudius* 21.3, Dio 60.7.3–4). Here we encounter a problem (ignored by Momigliano): under A.D. 5, Dio claims that the senators and the knights watched the circus games separately from the people, "as now also happens" (55.22.4); while under 41, he explains that before Claudius gave the senators their special section, senators and knights had customarily sat apart from the people, even though no places had been formally assigned to them (60.7.3–4). This claim contradicts not only Tacitus on 63, saying explicitly *ad eam diem indiscreti inibant*, but Suetonius on 41, saying explicitly *propria senatoribus constituit loca* promiscue spectare solitis (my emphasis). The contradiction cannot be resolved in terms of informal/formal or customary/legal: Tac-

¹² Momigliano, 458. This appears in a section entitled "Revisioni metodiche."

tus and Suetonius, both born in Nero's reign, independently and explicitly attest to the indiscriminate nature of the seating in the circus (as distinct from the theatre) before the reforms of 63 and 41, respectively. How can we possibly reject them (for they stand together) in favour of the much later Dio, so often confused about long-gone practices? Calpurnius Siculus could not have seen a mass of knights in the circus before A.D. 63: Tacitus tells us so¹³.

To adapt the words of R. Mayer, the Neronian dating is a sandcastle, and it can be kicked down. More apt a comparison would be a house of cards: no card is independent, and the only thing that keeps the house upright is the simple faith that it must be Neronian. The Neronian case should be stated as simply as possible. It depends on four elements: *maternis Iulis*; recent civil wars; the circumstances of the accession; and the *munus Neronis*.

The first two are simply invalid. Townend and Wiseman have both produced strong but sharply conflicting Neronian arguments for each. *Ipsa facto* the maternal Julians and the civil wars at the moment can offer neither "proof" nor even strong indication of Neronian date.

The second two raise another question of method. If one starts from the presumption that the emperor is Nero, one can demonstrate anything. One can interpret September as October, August or September as July, and claim what the poet does not say in *Eclogue* 1, that a new emperor acceded after the comet and the prophecy. One can read a *venatio* and the whole baggage of a dubious *gladiatorium munus* that are not there into *Eclogue* 7. And by the same token, in the same eclogue, one can say that the poet describes something that was not to happen for another six years. All these things one can do; but only if one has already decided that the emperor is Nero. Then it does not really matter what the poet says. If I choose to think that by describing a young, handsome and godlike emperor the poet means to flatter one who is middleaged, fat and balding, who can deny it?

For good reasons Haupt separated Calpurnius from Nemesianus; for bad he assigned him to the reign of Nero. Surely it is time to abandon blind *pietas* and to read the poet with fresh eyes. Fresh arguments, linguistic and historical, must be formulated to make Calpurnius a poet of the Silver Age, because the case for Nero is not now, and never has been, strong. Or it must be admitted that, on the grounds of style alone, Calpurnius is a very clever poet who flourished

¹³ Again, if Calpurnius is to be Neronian, we might want to read *nivei ... tribules* (Van Berchem): Augustus first forbade *pullati* the front ranks and made them sit, as the speaker in *Eclogue* 7 does, with the women (Suet., *Aug.* 44), and then we would have the front rows occupied by white-robed knights and 'pale-robed paupers' (cf. Martial 9.49.8 and 9.57.8: *tribulis*, when not used as 'fellow-tribesman', suggests a pauper with a cheap or worn-out toga). How often, though, does one have to emend Calpurnius merely to save his date? The contrast is between the speaker's own *pulla paupertas* and the richer and more privileged folks in front; so he must have seen a white sea of *equites* and equestrian military officers, *tribuni*, and the seats must have been reserved by class.

at a later and lower period in Latin letters. The young godlike Augustus whose favour he sought may have been Severus Alexander. If not Alexander, then who?

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