Nero proclaims the “freedom” of Greece in a speech during the Isthmian games and the city of Akraiphia prepares a decree in honour of the emperor, who is referred to as Zeus “the liberator”

Nero and the Freedom of Greece [1]

The historical authenticity of this public address is not only confirmed by Plutarch, Suetonius (Nero XXIV), and our inscription, but also by contemporary local coins from Corinth with the legend ADLOCUTIO AUGUSTI (“the speech of the Augustus”, see RPC I. 1203-1206). Nero was fluent in Greek (Suetonius, Nero VII.2; XX.3) and was likewise said to have judged rhetoric competitions in this language (Tacitus, Annals XIV.2; Suetonius, Nero XII). Hence, his authorship of the elaborated and somehow pompous sentences recorded in the inscription is plausible (see Jones,
“Nero Speaking”). The emperor described his grant as a gift (?????/dôrea), which was unexpected even for his generosity (?????????????/megalophrosynê). It should therefore be obvious that he did not want to present himself as a member of the humble folk, but rather as a ruler who had absolute control over benefits emanating from his superior powers. An example of this authority – accepted by the people of Greece as lines 11 and 12 imply, and as the sequence lord (?????/kyrios) of the whole world confirms in l. 31 – would be his reference to the Peloponnese. Nero famously attempted and failed to dig a channel through the isthmus of Corinth separating the Greek peninsula (see Campanile, “L’iscrizione neroniana,” p. 206-207). As a result of this magnanimous enterprise, he may have proposed to rename the “Island of Pelops” as the “Island of Nero,” or Neronesos, exactly as he had in mind for Rome (Neropolis) according to Suetonius (Nero LV).

Nero’s description of his grant of “freedom and tax-immunity” as something unprecedented (l. 14-15) is not accurate. While it is true that Greece had commonly been subject to foreign powers after the Classical Period, both Hellenistic rulers and Roman officers such as the aforementioned Flamininus previously proclaimed liberating ideals that were never reached (see Campanile, “L’iscrizione neroniana,” p. 217-223). Furthermore, as our inscription actually reports (l. 25), preceding Roman leaders (??????/hêgemones) had granted such privileges to individual cities (e.g. Chios or Aphrodisias, and even Nero himself to Rhodes: IG XII, 1.2). This said, the emperor is still completely right in claiming that no one had ever decided to free an entire province (??????/eparcheiá). Indeed, contemporary evidence confirms that Nero’s words were not a futile rhetorical exercise and had actual consequences. An inscription from Epidauros honours a secretary for administering local affairs diligently “when the conditions of freedom were still shaky” (IG IV² 1, 81). Likewise, had Nero’s grant been completely ineffective, Vespasian would not have needed to remove it (Suetonius, Vespasian VIII; Pausianias, Description of Greece VII.17). In sum, the message of the speech, as exaggerated and pretentious as it may sound, has to be framed in a real historical context. For instance, it is clear that Nero is alluding to the topic of the splendidous past in the Classical period when he talks about “Greece being at its peak” (l. 17). And yet, it is still interesting to realise that the emperor connects Greek prosperity with a lack of foreign domination, including that imposed by his fellow Roman compatriots. This discourse was shared by many nostalgic Greeks such as Plutarch, who could actually experience during his lifetime how key sites of the Classical world such as Delphi were struggling, and required the intervention of Rome (SIG² 801D). From Nero’s alignment with similar ideals, the reference to the emperor as a “friend-of-Greeks” (????????/philêlê̂n) can be better understood. The use of this appellation in a period and area in which “friends-of-the-Romans and/or Caesars” (????????/philorhômâi — ?????????/philokaisares) were abundant is particularly remarkable and even subversive (see e.g. Stertinius Xenophon).

After Nero’s speech, his message needed then to be spread across the local communities of Greece. The resolution (??????/psêphisma) from Akraiphiai (Boeotia: https://pleiades.stoa.org/places/540617) recorded in lines 27 to 58 deals precisely with this process. The council (?????/boulê) and people (?????/idêmos) were approving, but a clear promoter had been responsible for introducing the motion, Epaminondas, son of Epaminondas (l. 28-30). Our document refers to him as imperial high-priest (??????/archiereus) for life and of Nero. By virtue of an additional couple of very detailed inscriptions (IG VII 2711-2712), we know that the commitment of this Boeotian man to maintaining a nexus between his fatherland and the Roman rulers was certainly durable (see Oliver, “Epaminondas”). Firstly, he had volunteered to lead and sponsor an embassy before Gaius-Caligula for which he was congratulated both by the emperor and the local leagues of cities. Secondly, he financed the revival of an agonistic festival, originally dedicated to a local mythical hero, but, since the mid-1st century CE, also named after the Caesars, the Ptoia Kaisareia (see Schachtet, Cults of Boiotia, p. 70-73). It is therefore very likely that Epaminondas was present in Corinth representing either his city or one of the Greek leagues when Nero delivered the speech. Consequently, lines 31-46 would render his personal account of the event to the fellowmen of Akraiphiai. For this reason, the document is particularly interesting for analysing the provincial reception of such an exceptional imperial decision.

Nero’s titles are more complete in this case, and make possible an exact dating of the document to 67 CE. His subsequent identification with a sun god or New Helios was neither official nor unique among communities in the eastern Mediterranean (IGRR 3.345). Members of the Julio-Claudian family had informally been associated with Aphrodite (e.g. Gytheion, Ilium), and the city of Cyzicus bestowed the same solar attributes on Nero’s uncle, Gaius-Caligula. These precedents also have to be connected with the teachings of Seneca, preceptor of the emperor, who insisted in his writings on the analogy between imperial power and the sun’s rays (On Clemency I.8.4; Apocolocyntosis IV). At the same time, Nero himself was devoted to the cult of Apollo, god of his artistic talents and associated with Sun-Phoibos in Greek mythology (see Chaplin, Nero, p. 112-144). This religious aspect is also repeated in line 36, when Nero is said to “be pious to the gods of Greece” who had protected him. The same gods were praised by the emperor himself in his grant of freedom too (l. 22). For these reasons, and, above all, for his revolutionary grant of freedom – which is considered indigenous (????????/authigenês) and native.
(?????????/autochthôn) – he should be identified with Zeus the Liberator (???? ??????????/Zeus Eleutherios, see Kantirea, Les dieux, p. 81-84). Such attributes which already appeared attached to Tiberius in the sacred law of Gytheum, were also celebrated with contemporary coins (RPC I. 1241-1244), and therefore serve to connect the concept of freedom not only with one emperor but also with the rule of the Romans in general.

Once these motives had been outlined, the measures taken by the city of Akraiphiai [2] to honour Nero were listed (l. 46-58). Firstly, his name had to be added to an already existing altar of Zeus the Liberator. Secondly, statues of both Nero and his wife Messalina were to be set up in the temple of Ptoian Apollo, a local sanctuary famous since ancient times for its oracular services (see Schachter, Cults of Boiotia, p. 52-73). Finally, diverse and unspecified honours (????/timê) involving piety (????????/eusebeia) needed to be performed, and copies of the decree inscribed. The actions adopted by this community in Boeotia and led by a notable local confirm the close interconnection existing between the cult of native gods and the worshipping of new Roman emperors who had absolute power to benefit their subjects. Yes, Nero, the “friend of Greeks” and agonistic enthusiast, decided to proclaim the liberation of Achaea and the Peloponnese in Corinth, a move with strong and symbolic historical connotations, but also producing tangible consequences. Even considering the interested promotion of such ideals by particularly devoted individuals such as Epaminondas (see also Eratones of Rhodes), these displays of piety towards both humans and the gods of Greece could potentially generate local acceptance and devotion. Nonetheless, such divine favours and imperial deviations might not be reciprocally accepted by the more traditional Romans controlling the court from the Italian capital. What could be perceived as a virtue in the East only served to confirm in Rome that Nero was not fit to be an adequate emperor. A court and senatorial conspiracy was soon consummated, Nero put himself to death, and his memory became condemned (Suetonius, Nero XLIX). Love towards Greece was not part of the imperial agenda any longer, all Neronian favours were terminated, and, as a result, even previously devoted subjects such as the people of Akraiphiai accepted the new imperial policy. As a result, the names of Nero and his family were mostly erased in this inscription: another sign of how quickly provincials could adapt to the mutable circumstances of the Roman Empire.

Literary reference: Plutarch, Flamininus XII.8
Suetonius, Nero XXIV

Keywords in the original language:
Thematic keywords:

- **freedom** [43]
- **Nero** [44]
- **Roman emperor** [45]
- **Greece** [46]
- **Zeus** [47]
- **speech** [48]
- **Roman piety** [49]
- **imperial cult** [50]
- **statue** [51]
- **agonistic culture** [52]
- **generosity** [53]
- **benefaction** [54]
- **sun** [55]
- **Apollo** [56]
- **taxation** [57]
- **provincial elites** [58]
- **administration** [59]

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Oliver, James, *Epaminondas of Acraephia* [70], Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 12.2 (1971) : 221-237  

**Other sources connected with this document:**  
Inscription
The doctor of Claudius honoured at Kos [73]

Gaius Stertinius Xenophon, doctor of Claudius who participated in the conquest of Britain, is honoured at Kos

- Read more about The doctor of Claudius honoured at Kos [73]

Inscription

An Augustan governor on the freedom of Chios [74]

The provincial governor settles a dispute concerning the freedom of Chios and describes the use of previous official documents

- Read more about An Augustan governor on the freedom of Chios [74]

Inscription

Letter of Octavian to Ephesus concerning Aphrodisias [75]

Octavian requests the Ephesians to return a statue of Eros dedicated by his father Julius to Aphrodite in the city of Aphrodisias

- Read more about Letter of Octavian to Ephesus concerning Aphrodisias [75]

Inscription

Eratophanes of Rhodes, a devoted promoter of Claudius [76]

A local benefactor and priest of the imperial cult is honoured in both Rhodes and Caria for his piety towards the emperor

- Read more about Eratophanes of Rhodes, a devoted promoter of Claudius [76]

Inscription

Sacred Law of Gytheion [77]

- Read more about Sacred Law of Gytheion [77]

Inscription

Livilla as Anchisean Aphrodite in Ilium [78]
An inscription honouring Antonia Minor and the Julio-Claudian lineage in Ilium (Troia) calls Livilla “Aphrodite of Anchises”

• Read more about Livilla as Anchisean Aphrodite in Ilium [78]

Inscription

Gaius-Caligula, the New Sun, and the Royal House of Thrace [79]

The city of Cyzicus decrees that the kings of Thrace and Antonia Tryphaena are to be honoured because the emperor Gaius (Caligula) has confirmed their rule

• Read more about Gaius-Caligula, the New Sun, and the Royal House of Thrace [79]

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[15] http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/%CF%87%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B9%CF%82
[16] http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/%CE%B5%E1%BD%90%CF%84%CF%85%CF%87%CE%AE%CF%82