NERONIAN ORAL POLITICS:
THE CASE OF MUSONIUS RUFUS

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On the 20th of December in the Year of the Four Emperors, AD69, a delegation from the Senate, attempting to negotiate on behalf of the Emperor Vitellius, met with forces of Vespasian under the command of Marcus Antonius Primus, on the Via Flaminia north of Rome. Among their number a Stoic philosopher and Roman eques named Musonius Rufus had insinuated himself, according to the great senatorial historian Tacitus:

miscuerat se legatis Musonius Rufus equestris ordinis, studium philosophiae et placita Stoicorum aemulatus; coeptabatque permixtus manipulis, bona pacis ac belli discrimina disserens, armatos monere. id plerisque ludibrio, pluribus taedio; nec deerant qui propellerent proculcarentque, ni admonitu modestissimi cuiusque et aliis minitantibus omisisset intempestivam sapientiam.

(Histories 3. 81. 1)

One Musonius Rufus, a man of equestrian rank, strongly attached to the pursuit of philosophy and to the tenets of the Stoics, had joined the envoys. He mingled with the troops, and, enlarging on the blessings of peace and the perils of war, began to admonish the armed crowd. Many thought it ridiculous; more thought it tiresome; some were ready to throw him down and trample him under foot, had he not yielded to the warnings of the more orderly and the threats of others, and ceased to display his ill-timed wisdom. (trans. Church and Brodribb)

Though once dubbed “the Roman Socrates,”1 Musonius today is little known outside the world of philosophy and by no means a central figure there. Yet his influence in transmitting and transforming the teachings of the Stoa for a Roman audience was so great that he has been considered by some the “third founder of Stoicism.” Moreover, oral praxis was fundamental to both his philosophical method and political theory. On this December day, one day after the end of the Saturnalia, as we might note, he was practicing his Socratic dialectic on soldiers encamped against the capital city, attempting to persuade them that

1 I take this sobriquet, as I do Musonius’ text and translation, from Lutz 1947.
the hazards of armed conflict outweighed the possible benefits. Some
in his audience perhaps thought this a Saturnalian prank, while others
took umbrage. Musonius was no more successful than the delegation
as a whole; later that day Vitellius died at the hands of Vespasian’s
forces and his body was flung into the Tiber. The fact that Musonius’
attempt at oral politics did not succeed on this occasion, however, does
not lessen its interest in the context of the end of the Julio-Claudians
and the foundation of the Flavian dynasty.

By this time Musonius was already no stranger to political contro-
versy. Born around AD 30 in Volscini in Etruria, he became an asso-
ciate of the Stoic Rubellius Plautus. According to Tacitus, rumors
began to circulate in AD 60 following the appearance of a comet that
a change in rulers was imminent, and these centered on Plautus, who
had a claim to Julian descent through the female line. Following fur-
ther portents, Nero took alarm and wrote advising Plautus to retire to
his holdings in Asia. Musonius followed his friend into voluntary exile
and was with him when Nero sent a centurion to kill Plautus in 62.
Musonius returned to Rome thereafter, but in 65 was himself impli-
cated in the Pisonian conspiracy and exiled to the island of Gyaros
in the Aegean, though Tacitus here reports that Musonius was ban-
ished for his fame and for teaching the young wisdom. After the death
of Nero he returned again to Rome, and thus was on hand to join
the delegation to the camp of Antonius Primus. Vespasian seems to

2 The chronology has been disputed, but it seems likeliest that both the embassy
and Vitellius’ murder took place on December 20; see Holzapfel 1913: 289–304 and

3 A very useful short biography, upon which I draw, appears in Olshausen 2001:
249–255, esp. 250–251.

4 Tacitus, Annals 14.22: et omnium ore Rubellius Plautus celebratur, cui nobilitas per matrem
ex Iulia familia (“In everyone’s mouth was the name of Rubellius Plautus, who inherited
through his mother the high nobility of the Julian family.”).

5 Tacitus, Annals 14.22: ergo permotus his Nero componit ad Plautum litteras, consuleret quieti
urbis seque prava diffamantibus subtraheret: esse illi per Asiam avitos agros, in quibus tuta et inturbida
iuventa frueretur (“This alarmed Nero, and he wrote a letter to Plautus, bidding him
consider the tranquility of Rome and withdraw himself from mischievous gossip. He
had ancestral possessions in Asia, where he might enjoy his youth safely and quietly.”).

6 Tacitus, Annals 14.59. Musonius, along with a Greek philosopher, counsels Plautus
to face death with constancy.

7 Tacitus, Annals 15.71: Verginius [Flavum et Musonium] Rufum claritudo nominis expulit:
nam Verginius studia iuvenum eloquentia, Musonius praeceps sapientiae fovebat (“It was
the splendor of their name which drove Verginius Flavus and Musonius Rufus into exile.
Verginius encouraged the studies of our youth by his eloquence; Rufus by the teachings
of philosophy.”).