**The Pisonian Conspiracy, AD 65**

Towards the end of Nero’s time in power, opposition was clearly growing. Free from the influence of his mother Nero was able to indulge his excessive lifestyle and character; revolts began to develop in the empire, in Britain in 61 and Judaea in 66; the re-building from the fire of 64 also placed a heavy burden on Romans as they had to pay a ‘fire tax’.

The most serious example of opposition to Nero (before his overthrow) came in AD 65 with the **Pisonian Conspiracy.** Gaius Calpurnius Piso was a senator who became the figurehead of a broad conspiracy which included several senators and equestrians

The events of the Pisonian Conspiracy are covered in great detail by Tacitus. Read the summary below all of which is taken from a prescribed source which you need to be able to use in the exam.

**Prescribed Source – Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.48-74**

* Tacitus claims the “Senators, and knights, officers, even women” joined the conspiracy – he is keen to show that it was a broad conspiracy and that Nero was hated by all groups, not just a few individuals
* One of the alleged conspirators was Seneca
* Piso was an “affable” character according to Tacitus but also “superficial”. Instead the plot was formed by other figures who used Piso as a figurehead and also because he had a noble background
* Serious discussions about killing Nero began when Faenius Rufus, co-Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, joined the conspiracy. Rufus was the backbone of the plot and was opposed more so to Tigellinus – Nero’s Prefect of the Guard
* The plotters are shown to be indecisive about when to act against Nero
* There was confusion within the conspiracy about who or what would replace Nero. Many saw Piso as the successor but he feared a rival claimant called Junius Silanus. Piso also feared that some in the Senate wanted to restore the Republic.
* Finally the plotters decided to act at the Circus Games dedicated to Ceres (12-19 April) where Nero would be more accessible. The plotters would pin Nero down and kill him, whilst Faenius Rufus would then escort Piso to the Praetorian camp to start the process of making him emperor.
* Tacitus reports a detail in Pliny the Elder that Claudia Antonia (Claudius’ daughter) was to accompany Piso adding huge legitimacy to his claim. However, Tacitus does not claim this as a fact – “True or false, I have felt that this statement ought at least to be recorded. Yet it seems absurd…”
* The plot was “astonishingly well kept” until it was betrayed by a freed slave called Milichus who informed Nero of his master’s (Flavius Scaevinus) plan to kill him. At this point the plot unravelled
* Tacitus explains how senators and equestrians quickly informed on their co-conspirators when threatened by torture, “before anyone had a laid a hand on them”. He contrasts this with a women involved in the plot – Epicharis – who did not give away any names despite being brutally tortured and instead managed to commit suicide to prevent herself from doing so. Tacitus is clearly critical of the ease with which the plotters gave up and betrayed one another.
* “Nero became increasingly frightened” and started mass interrogations of suspected plotters. Piso was urged to go to the Praetorian camp and make a bid for power. Piso refused, however, and “shut himself in his house”. He went on to commit suicide and loaded his will with “repulsive flattery of Nero” to try and save his wife.
* Seneca was executed although “Nero had no proof of Seneca’s complicity but was glad to use arms against him when poison had failed”. Before committing suicide, Tacitus explains that Seneca said the following: “’Surely nobody was unaware that Nero was cruel!’ he added. ‘After murdering his mother and brother, it only remained for him to kill his teacher and tutor.’”
* The co-Prefect Faenius Rufus was also executed when his role in the plot was betrayed. Tacitus also gives his supposed final words: “I began detesting you when you murdered your mother and wife and became charioteer, actor, and incendiary!”
* A number of executions followed and Nero clearly used the plot as an excuse to execute dozens of senators and equestrians – “Executions now abounded in the city”. Nero wanted to reassert his authority in Rome and also used the opportunity to confiscate the property of those he attacked.
* Nero went on to give 2,000 sesterces and free corn to every soldier of the Praetorian Guard. He then addressed the senate to announce that the plot had been defeated “as though to announce a military victory”.
* “In the senate there was abundant congratulation”. The senate also voted for a temple to be built to the Divine Nero which he vetoed.

**QUESTION:** on the basis of the summary you have read, how serious a threat do you think the Pisonian Conspiracy posed to Nero?