

Anthony A. Barrett, Elaine Fantham & John C. Yardley, eds. *The Emperor Nero. A Guide to the Ancient Sources.* Princeton University Press. 2016. Paper \$35.00 (£24.95). ISBN: 978-1-400-88110-9 (ISBN: 978-0-691-15651-4 EBook). 336 pp. 11 halftones. 6 maps.

The emperor Nero continues to exercise interest among modern audiences, and courses on Nero, whether from a historical perspective or with a more literary focus, abound as undergraduate classes as well as graduate seminars. This book, which is a welcome addition to an already rich field, fills an important gap, for it collects, translates, and comments on the main ancient sources for the emperor Nero. It is a book that will benefit advanced undergraduates, in history or classics. But graduate students too, as well as scholars, will profit from its consultation, even if the specialist should always check the source(s) in the original Greek or Latin. The editors, as stated in the preface, made subjective choices as to what sources to offer. The sources, however, are generally interpreted *sine ira et studio*, and thus enable readers to form their own idea of an emperor who, perhaps more than any other, has suffered the prejudice of the ancients, namely Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio.

The Introduction (xi–xxiii), which is elegantly written, clear, and at the same time informative, provides an overview of the historical background to Nero’s rise; of the main events of his reign; and of the main literary sources for this period, both extant and lost. Each of the ten chapters comprises a brief introduction, followed by extensive chunks of historical sources, mainly literary, but also epigraphic and numismatic, grouped by topic and preceded by short summary captions in italics. The commentary is relegated to the copious footnotes, which explain the texts thoroughly and pointedly, albeit with some repetitions, particularly in Chapter VIII, and also in Chapter X, where Nero’s date of death (June 9) is repeated in four different notes, and once even incorrectly (June 8 in n.23).

Chapters I and II treat Nero’s upbringing and early years, focusing on Agrippina’s machinations and Seneca’s role as guide to the new princeps. In addition to key passages from Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio, an interesting “box” points out numismatic innovations under Claudius, while an appendix (to Chapter I) underlines the historical problems that surround the precise year of Nero’s birthdate. The role of Seneca is justly given emphasis with regard to the young emperor’s early decisions, which caused optimism among the senators, while generous notes, mostly on historical matters, help understand how Nero’s early legislation tried to project a certain continuity with Augustus’ principate.

Chapter III is devoted to the internal enemies, real or perceived, that Nero had to face off, and eventually had killed. The first half focuses on Britannicus, Cornelius Sulla, and Rubellius Plautus; the second half deals with Agrippina. The latter’s death receives great care, and the editors emphasize the inconsistencies that emerge among the literary sources, especially on the episode of the collapsing boat. As is often the case with this book, the editors do not take a firm position as to what *actually*

happened; they offer the materials, from which the reader can draw his/her own conclusions. But even an inexperienced undergraduate will not fail to understand that Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio depend on the same source(s), and perhaps even draw on each other in some cases, and that the source is, for the most part, openly hostile to Nero.

In Chapter IV and V, the focus shifts to external affairs. In Chapter IV, the editors, following Tacitus' (and Dio's) practice of combining events that extended over a longer period of time, provide an overview of the relationship between Rome and Parthia. The reason for doing so is obvious: to give coherence to a narrative that would otherwise become almost unintelligible. After a background introduction, the chronological treatment begins with the year 55 and ends with the symbolic surrender of Tiridates to Corbulo in 63. The Tacitean narrative dominates this chapter, but, despite the abundant notes that try to explain these complex vicissitudes, and the numerous problems of chronology and geography that exist, the Parthian narrative remains difficult and confusing, almost insurmountable for an undergraduate audience. Chapter V deals with Britain and Germany. The revolt of Boudica takes up most of the narrative, after a lengthy introduction has provided a historical overview of the Roman presence in Britain, and the financial burden that the native populations had to suffer at the hands of greedy Roman procurators. The Tacitean narrative, but also Dio's account, is very engaging, and, despite the stereotypical characterization that both authors reserve for Boudica and her people, the Roman leaders are not spared some harsh criticism. In the end, the British tribes had no chance against the much better organized Roman legions, but the figure of Boudica (just like that of Arminius in Germany) is still a symbol of national resistance and pride in modern England, where these events will be particularly appealing to students. Germany did not cause considerable problems during the reign of Nero, and the few incidents that occurred were promptly suppressed. By this time, the Romans had abandoned their audacious plans of extending the frontier to the Elbe, and the river Rhine remained the natural border of the empire.

Chapter VI focuses on one event: the Great Fire of 64, and the subsequent punishment of the Christians as scapegoats. It is perhaps the most fascinating chapter of the whole book, not only because of its subject matter, but especially because the editors go to great lengths to explain how Tacitus alone, among our ancient sources, doubts Nero's responsibility. They also emphasize that Nero took many good decisions to stop the fire, or at least to provide shelter to those most affected. In truth, the Tacitean narrative does not exonerate Nero, but it is evident that certainty could not, and cannot, be obtained. To this day, tradition blames Nero, who is often portrayed as singing while Rome burned. In this case, however, he may have been a victim of his own fame. Some skepticism is necessary also with Tacitus' account of Nero's persecutions, a key passage of which, the famous mention of Christ's death under Pilate, the editors admit could be a later Christian interpolation. All the sources

are accurately scrutinized, and the traditional view is often challenged. The editors are to be praised for such an engaging reading.

While Chapter VII, which collects the relevant literary sources on Nero's wives, (especially his relationship with Poppaea) is somewhat less gripping, Chapter VIII treats the dramatic events of the Pisonian Conspiracy, to which Tacitus devotes an unparalleled account. The historical notes are very thorough, with abundant information on the many figures that were involved, particularly Seneca, whom the editors incline to believe could not have been completely unaware of the plot. This conspiracy is fascinating and puzzling at the same time, for Tacitus seems to be particularly well informed about an event which, by its own nature, was supposed to remain secret. The editors perhaps do not emphasize enough that the death of Seneca, together with those of Petronius and Thrasea Paetus, also translated in this chapter, have many elements in common (in the case of Petronius, ironically reversed), and are often seen in terms of "staged deaths". The reason for their similarities could be Tacitus' artistry, but it is mostly likely owed to Tacitus' source(s), probably influenced by the *exitus* literature.

Chapter IX follows Nero's "obsession with stage performance", in a career path that would eventually make him "the chief entertainer of the Roman people" (231). The way in which the sources are presented, which is not chronological but somewhat thematic, switching back and forth among Suetonius, Dio, and Tacitus, makes it a little difficult to follow for someone who is not already familiar with Nero's performances, but one must admit that the sources themselves are indeed confusing, and it is often unclear whether Tacitus, Suetonius, or Dio are referring to the same event(s). Ample space is also given to Nero's Greek tour, for which Tacitus' text is missing, including Nero's famous declaration of freedom for all Greeks (*ILS* 8794). An appendix to this chapter examines more closely the nature of panegyric poetry in the early empire, with excerpts from the *Apocolocyntosis* and Lucan's preface, in which the poet praises Nero quite extravagantly—perhaps ironically.

The last chapter is appropriately entitled "Death". We must rely mostly on Suetonius and Dio for the last period of Nero's reign, and especially for the details of his death, which he met, if we can trust our sources, in such a dramatic way as only an artist emperor could have done.

The editorial quality of the book is very good, except for occasional typos. In the preface (p. ix), the book is said to be divided into twelve thematic chapters. The chapters are in fact ten. The concluding bibliography is necessarily selective, with works mostly in English. The index, which is restricted to the primary texts, could have been more generous, and thus more useful, if it had included also the notes. An index of all the primary texts would have been very useful, too, as well as a family tree of at least the Julio-Claudians, and of Nero's closest family members (how else, for example, could anyone make sense of n.54 on p.185?). Overall, this is an enjoyable book to read, well edited and engaging, ideal for undergraduate classes on

the history of the early empire. Its main quality, in my opinion, lies in the way the editors present the materials, which they interpret as objectively as they can, rejecting traditional views that are too often based on our unwarranted trustworthiness of ancient historical texts.

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