

**John F. Drinkwater, *Nero. Emperor and Court*.** Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xviii + 449. CAD \$51.95. ISBN 978-1-108-47264-7 Hardback.

John F. Drinkwater may be a Professor Emeritus of the University of Nottingham, but on the basis of *Nero Emperor and Court*, published just a few months ago, he is clearly not retired from the study of Roman history. The author is best known for three major works on Roman Gaul, but what made the first, great impression on this observer, both for approach and insight, was his paper, “The Rise and Fall of the Gallic Julii”, in *Latomus* 37 (1978). The Professor Emeritus’ new book, a focus on a single person as opposed to an entire region, is a different topic for him, but he is still within the same span of time about which he is so knowledgeable.

The book itself is divided first into three Parts, where Part I is entitled Background, Part II, Assessment and Part III, End, and each Part in turn is subdivided into many sections, which are themselves then split into subsections. In his Introduction, Drinkwater advises that “This book is not a ‘life and reign’ ” (p. 1) and later (p.3) that (he) “provides no continuous narrative”. For those reasons, an investigating scholar is advised to check the Contents and go directly to the topic of immediate interest, rather than reading the book from cover to cover. *Nero. Emperor and Court* is thorough, a treatment densely packed with facts, ancient references and modern citations, so much so that even if you know the period well, you will need to take it slowly. Absorbing all that is in just a single section will take a great deal of concentration. The book is designed not for amateur history buffs hoping to be introduced to Nero and his reign, but for professional Roman historians, graduate students or perhaps very advanced undergraduates.

In the first words of the first page of the front matter, Drinkwater states, “This book portrays Nero, not as the murderous tyrant of tradition, but as a young man ever reluctant to fulfil his responsibilities as emperor and ever anxious to demonstrate his genuine skills as a sportsman and artist.” Later, in the final sentence of the section 1.10 Achievements (p. 31), after recounting all of the misdeeds of which Nero was accused, namely, the murders/killings of Claudius, Britannicus, his own mother, those of Seneca, Burrus, Octavia, Poppaea, as well as the destruction of the leading men of the Senate, the persecution of the Christians, the wastefulness of the Golden House, etc., the author writes, “But this bad Nero is the Nero of his enemies... He deserves to be looked at afresh.” (p. 31). In other words, the book hopes to revise the standard view and appraisal of Nero, especially as relating to the crimes or misdeeds associated with him. Reconsidering whether Nero was a monster is a legitimate theme, the precedent which immediately comes to mind being Brian Jones’ re-evaluation of Domitian in 1992.

Each of the incidents listed above is discussed in great depth in their subsections, the citation of ancient and modern sources meticulous in all cases. Drinkwater, we might say, assumes the role of defense attorney for a man accused of all those monstrous crimes; as is the case in any legal trial, modern or ancient, you may agree

with the barrister's conclusions or not. In such cases, for example, as the deaths of Claudius, p. 171, Britannicus, p. 174-176, or Burrus, p. 187-189, Drinkwater clears Nero of responsibility and shows how others bore the greatest guilt; Nero definitely benefitted from those deaths, though that alone did not mean direct responsibility. Similarly against the notion put forward by Suetonius that his adoptive sister and cousin, Antonia, was executed because she had rejected his offer of marriage, Drinkwater counters that she was executed because of her involvement in the Pisonian Conspiracy; that conclusion, admittedly, is not a new one, as that is what is stated in the very short entry about Antonia in the Oxford Classical Dictionary of 1970. The discussion of the Pisonian Conspiracy, its formation, motives, participants, was handled well (pp, 197-219), and by the end, we can hardly fault Nero for executing those who were involved in a plot to overthrow him. In all of those executions, both of relatives and non-relatives, Nero could point to the natural law of self-preservation, for which no jury would convict him. Similarly, the section that dealt with the Golden House (II. 10.5, p. 248-263) could easily lead you to think that there were worse ways to spend those large amounts of money, that this building was a showcase not just of the latest and finest art, but of Roman architectural and engineering brilliance.

There are also times, however, when you might disagree with the author. Where this reader had the strongest issues with Drinkwater's defense of Nero were in what might be considered the three most serious or horrifying cases, the deaths of his mother and his wife, Poppaea and the persecution of the Christians. For the killing of Agrippina (pp.176-187), in answer to the author's own question, "But did Nero cold-bloodedly order her death?" (p.179), the conclusion was that the Emperor was pressured, that his mother was something of a threat and that he had no other choice. Drinkwater still admits that Nero sentenced his mother to death (p. 186), which to this reader does not do much to dispel the idea that Agrippina's son was a despicable character. As for the death of Poppaea, the pregnant wife who, after she was kicked by an enraged Nero, suffered a miscarriage and later died from her injuries, Drinkwater's conclusion that Nero's actions were not the "crazed acts of murder by a psychopathic tyrant", but simply that he was "at worst guilty of manslaughter" (p. 219), were unconvincing and again detrimental to his overall case that Nero's behaviour was not monstrous.

For the persecution of the Christians in A.D. 65, Drinkwater's discussion led to the conclusion that the Christians were not punished because they were blamed for the Great Fire, but simply because they were Christians. I wondered how that was something new, Tacitus having said more or less the same thing, (*Christiani*) *haud proinde in crimine incendii quam odio humani generis convicti sunt* (Ann. XV. 44), but as the point was intended to demonstrate yet another example of how Nero was not a monster, a better argument might have been to disprove that these innocent people were not torn to pieces by dogs or made into torches just to accommodate one man's brutality.

In the 421-page text, there are a few minor errors of fact or wording, as when Drinkwater mentioned that Corbulo had been appointed by Agrippa (p. 142), where the name “Agrippina” was what was meant or when he referred to Antonia as the step-sister of Britannicus and Octavia (p. 219), where I think the more accurate term would be half-sister, since they all shared the same father. On page 395, he writes, “(Galba) was, indeed, an intimate of the Julio-Claudians. Livia had adopted him and named him a major beneficiary in her will.”, but the line is misleading, as it gives the impression that the Livia who adopted him was the wife of Augustus and not Livia Ocellina. Drinkwater cites Bingham’s 2013 work on the Praetorian Guard when he refers to Faenius Rufus as “the first Praetorian prefect known to have taken an active role in a plot against the *princeps*.”, though when I read the sentence, all I could think about was Sejanus and his great plan as well as the mystery Prefect who was aware of and who therefore gave his tacit support to the overthrow of Caligula; in fairness, the word “active” was probably the most important word there. Lastly, although there were two Corbulos (Corbulones?) in Roman Imperial History, the father (Tac. *Ann.* 3.31) and much more famous son, I suspect the phrasing “Corbulos’ criticism of the Caucasus expedition” (p. 227), was simply a misplaced apostrophe.

Stylistically, although the thorough handling of the whole body of evidence was mentioned above, sometimes that thoroughness made for extremely long paragraphs, two extraordinary examples found on pp. 216-218 and 289-291; many other paragraphs were not multiple pages, but at least a full page. In his Introduction, Drinkwater prepares his readers with the words, “I have been generous with internal cross-references.” (p. 3), a proviso that refers to the many footnotes that read, as examples “above 123” or “below 234”. While he was generous in that regard, the references themselves were not always that helpful. As one example, on p. 167 the author wrote, “(Nero) disliked long-distance travel” and the sentence was marked with footnote 123, which read “Below 377”. I hoped there I would find the ancient evidence of Nero’s disdain for lengthy trips, but instead on page 377, what was stated was that “(Nero) was happy to pursue his philhellenism at home” and that “he had no need to go abroad.” Eventually, I stopped checking the “above” or “below” references, as jumping back and forth, a bit like playing a game of snakes and ladders, was just a distraction.

In this book, a reader may agree with this point or that and just as easily you may find objection with one argument or another. Whatever is the case, the author succeeds in what he intended to do, namely, to make you re-consider all that you know or think you know about Nero, especially the notion that he was a monster figure; if you disagree with the author, it is your task to formulate a better reason why he in fact was. Drinkwater’s *Nero. Emperor and Court* is crucial for any scholar of Nero, of the Julio-Claudians or of the whole period of the Early Roman Empire, not just because it is so up-to-date, not just because it is thorough and informative, but because the author challenges each reader to look again at ideas and issues which have long been accepted as unquestionable fact.

