

## *Introduction*

This book is not a ‘life and reign’ of the emperor Nero. It is, rather, an attempt to understand how the Roman Empire was run from the centre in the middle years of the first century AD. The Empire could not have been directed by a single individual, however admirable his character and abilities. My aim is to present a more dynamic picture of political life by identifying those involved alongside Nero, to set these people in their contexts – metropolitan, provincial and foreign – and to make them move in the landscape. My main argument is that in the 50s and 60s the central administrative institution, the Principate, was still very plastic, allowing room for experiment and change. I propose that Nero was never fully in control of affairs and that, increasingly diverted by sport and art, he allowed others to act in his name.

I use the term ‘emperor’ in my title because it is expected. However, throughout my main text I avoid it. This is because ‘emperor’ comes with a baggage of medieval and modern associations out of keeping with the reality of the position of the leader of the Roman state in the first century AD: an autocrat who was not a king, who exercised power and influence independently (sometimes, perhaps, in spite) of the offices he held in a purportedly continuing Republic. For this reason I was tempted by ‘First Man’ and ‘Leader’,<sup>1</sup> but too frequent a use of these is awkward and too reminiscent of ‘il Duce’ and ‘der Führer’. Having toyed with ‘the Boss’, ‘the Chief’ and even ‘the Supreme One’, I, like Rutledge and Romm,<sup>2</sup> opted for *princeps*. Though my focus is not Nero, it is impossible to keep him out of the picture. I experienced most difficulty in establishing his frame of mind: bluntly, was he mad? I felt obliged to consider his psychology head on and came to the conclusion that, while he was not mad, he suffered mental problems after the death of Poppaea in 65 and underwent some sort of breakdown after his return from Greece in 67.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Osgood 2011, 19.    <sup>2</sup> Rutledge 2001; Romm 2014.

Though I began with no intention to whitewash Nero's historical reputation, in the end, consonant with a contemporary current of research in which, for example, Winterling has presented a 'new' Gaius and Osgood and Barrett have offered a 'new' Agrippina and Claudius, I propose a 'new' Nero: more innocent but much less engaged in affairs than he of the source tradition.

Study of Nero and the Neronian age began at the dawn of modern Ancient History and is still a very lively field. It has generated a multitude of publications of which I have been able to read and consider only a tiny proportion. I apologise in advance for any oversight of important contributions and any unintended reinvention of published thinking. As a newcomer to the period, I was greatly aided by the availability of a number of key studies. My cherished copy of Bradley's *Suetonius' Life of Nero*, given to me in friendship by the author many years ago and making him a constant companion in spirit, was indispensable. Cizek's *Néron* and Griffin's *Nero* remain mines of information and stimulation, and in my assessment of Nero I was much influenced by Champlin's *Nero*.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these monographs I was able to draw on volumes of collected papers, beginning with Elsner and Master's *Reflections of Nero* and including more recently Buckley and Dinter's *Companion to the Neronian Age*, Gibson's *Julio-Claudian Succession*, Walde's *Neros Wirklichkeiten* and Bartsch and Schiesaro's *Cambridge Companion to Seneca*.<sup>4</sup> These enabled me to engage with a much wider range of topics than would otherwise have been possible. Other monographs, for example Rudich's *Political Dissidence*, Bartsch's *Actors and Audiences*, Rutledge's *Imperial Inquisitions*, Ginsburg's *Representing Agrippina*, Cottier *et al.*'s, *Customs Law*, Winterling's *Politics and Society*, Meyboom and Moormann's *Le decorazioni dipinte*, Butcher and Ponting's *Metallurgy of Roman Silver Coinage* and Kimmerle's *Lucan*, I found especially stimulating.<sup>5</sup> In understanding Neronian Rome I would have been lost without Tomi and Rea's detailed and magnificently illustrated *Nerone*, the companion volume to the exhibition of April to September 2011 which I was fortunate to be able to attend.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Bradley 1978a; Cizek 1982; Griffin 1984; Champlin 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Elsner and Masters 1994; Buckley and Dinter 2013; Gibson 2013; Walde 2013; Bartsch and Schiesaro 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Rudich 1993; Bartsch 1994; Rutledge 2001; Ginsburg 2006; Cottier *et al.* 2008; Meyboom and Moormann 2013; Butcher and Ponting 2014; Kimmerle 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Tome and Rea 2011.

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Because I provide no continuous narrative, and because points and arguments made at one point are cited or corroborated in others, I have been generous with internal cross-references.

My approach is not based on any theorising but is a consciously ‘old-fashioned, cautiously positivist, empirical and evidence-based enquiry’.<sup>7</sup> However, what struck me throughout in dealing with the age of Nero is that, if we are to go beyond the suspect tale of our literary sources, we have to accept that Ancient History is disciplined novel writing: as long as we do not go beyond the evidence and reasonable plausibility, we must dare a high degree of speculation.

Except where otherwise stated, I take translations of Greek and Latin authors from the Loeb series, occasionally amending them to make them sound more modern or bring out particular points. In the text and on maps I have not striven for consistency with place names but have used those which I felt will be most familiar to anglophones, usually, but not always, the modern forms: so Lyon not Lugdunum and Padua not Patavium; but Misenum, not Miseno, and Sinope, not Sinop etc. All dates are AD unless otherwise stated.

<sup>7</sup> Vervaeet on his approach to late Roman Republican history, quoted by Lanfranchi 2015.

PART I

*Background*



Figure 1 The West and Greece

## CHAPTER I

*Nero, 'Bad' or 'Good'?***1.1 Introduction**

In Chapters 1 – 7, I consider the origins, operation and character of the Neronian administration. I begin by sketching out the *princeps*' life and historiography, and explaining my approach to him and his principate

**1.2 Biography**

Nero was born on 15 December 37.<sup>1</sup> His mother was Agrippina II, daughter of Germanicus and Agrippina I, and sister of the incumbent *princeps*, Gaius. Nero was her only child. His father was Gn. Domitius Ahenobarbus, a high-ranking aristocrat. Taking his name from his father, he was first called Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus. His father died in late 39 or early 40, and his mother remarried twice, the second time to Gaius' successor, Claudius, in 49. Having betrothed L. Domitius Ahenobarbus to his daughter, Octavia, in 49, Claudius adopted him as his son on 25 February 50 and changed his name to Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus Germanicus. Nero married Octavia in 53. He replaced Claudius as *princeps* on 13 October 54. At just under 17 years of age, he was the youngest to date but he was also to be the last Julio-Claudian. He committed suicide in June 68 following rebellions by Vindex in Gaul and Galba in Spain, and desertion by his own followers in Rome.

**1.3 Demonisation**

Even before his death, Nero suffered growing denigration and soon there seemed to be no monstrosity of which he was thought incapable.<sup>2</sup> In the early Flavian pseudo-Senecan drama *Octavia*, he is depicted as 'the

<sup>1</sup> Bradley 1978a, 48, 53; Kienast 2004, 96.

<sup>2</sup> Hohl 1918, 350–1; Rathbone 2008, 276.

proverbial tyrant, robbed of any personal characteristics, a mere incarnation of the will to evil'.<sup>3</sup> Written when a new dynasty of *principes* encouraged disparagement of the later Julio-Claudians to justify itself as their replacement, the play helped to establish the memory of Nero as a 'monster'.<sup>4</sup> He joined the 'mad' Gaius in the canon of 'wickedest' *principes*.<sup>5</sup> Wider vilification resulted from Jewish loathing of him as the instigator of the war that destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple. Jewish resentment was adopted and developed by later Christians, who made Nero the first great persecutor of the faith.<sup>6</sup> Also out of Judaism, but through the New Testament book of 'Revelation', came the Christian view of Nero as either the herald of the Anti-Christ or the Anti-Christ in person, which shaped the ever more grotesque late Antique and medieval view of him. Each age needs its own 'bad' Nero.<sup>7</sup> Ancient and medieval demonisation determined modern conceptions of this emperor. At the academic level, for example, preconceptions of the actions and demeanour of Nero the 'tyrant' and 'theocrat' have influenced both the identification of 'tyrannical'- and 'theocratic'-looking statue heads and busts as his and the interpretation of wall-paintings.<sup>8</sup> At the popular level, Nero the 'monster' is widely known thanks mostly to Henrik Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis?*, first published in Polish in 1896, and to various screen-dramatisations of the work from 1901. The most striking, directed by Mervyn LeRoy and starring Peter Ustinov as Nero, was released in 1951. There can be no doubt that Ustinov's Nero – mad, bad and dangerous to know – has become the Nero of popular imagination.<sup>9</sup> Novels, films and television dramas continue to project the 'evil' Nero.<sup>10</sup> Our own society seems to be particularly obsessed by 'the villains of history'.<sup>11</sup> Nero has joined Jack the Ripper as a character more fictional than real – an instantly

<sup>3</sup> Griffin 1984, 100.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mart. *Spect.* 2: Nero as the *ferus rex* ('mad king'). Henderson 1905, 419; Barton 1994, 50; Rubiés 1994, 40; Champlin 2003, 104; Reitz 2006, 49; Rathbone 2008, 252; Buckley 2013a, 218; Buckley 2013b, 133–4, 140–2, 145–148, 151; Hurley 2013, 30, 34–7; Mordine 2013, 102–3.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Winterling 2007, 178. <sup>6</sup> Maier 2013, 386; below 244.

<sup>7</sup> Henderson 1905, 10, 418, 420–1; Grant 1970, 94; Cizek 1982, 16–18; Wiseman 1991, xii; Fini 1994, 9–11; Wyke 1994, 12; Champlin 2003, 13–14, 17–19; Waldherr 2005, 9; Reitz 2006, 4–9; Maier 2013, 387–91, 394, 400. Cf. Rubiés 1994 for the Tacitean 'Nero', and its use in the Renaissance.

<sup>8</sup> Bragantini 2011, 191–3; Cadario 2011, 177, 182, 184, 188; Kreikenbom 2013; cf. Ginsburg 2006, 55.

<sup>9</sup> Fini 1994, 11; Wyke 1994; Pucci 2011; cf. Miziolek 2011, 60–1.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. as in the BBC's *Ancient Rome: The Decline and Fall of an Empire* (2006).

<sup>11</sup> Barrett 1996, xii.

recognisable, disturbingly fascinating stereotype of ‘inconceivable wickedness and unnatural horror’.<sup>12</sup>

#### 1.4 Rationalisation

There are two ways of dealing with the denigrated, vilified and demonised Nero. The first is to assume that, though in places distorted, the ancient tradition is correct: Nero was a tyrant, so we should not be surprised if subsequent generations made him a monster. This was the view of Sir Ronald Syme, who argued that Tacitus, writing ‘of times within the reach of memory or of reliable testimony’, produced a broadly accurate account of his principate. Tacitus’ account closely resembles those of Suetonius and Cassius Dio, our other main sources, because they, too, were reconstructing the same truth from the same historical material. All three draw a picture of the *princeps* that ‘corresponds in a large measure to the facts’.<sup>13</sup> The second is to treat the consonance between Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio as suspect. It is, in fact, now generally agreed that all drew the bulk of their information from an earlier established anti-Neronian historiographical tradition. This tradition was available in a number of now vanished works: by Pliny I, Cluvius Rufus and Fabius Rusticus, of whom the first was particularly hostile to the *princeps*.<sup>14</sup> These authors themselves, however, drew on existing negative assessments of Nero manifested, as we have seen, in the *Octavia*.<sup>15</sup> Thus, despite Syme, it is now accepted that Tacitus, the most influential extant writer, and one certainly capable of independent research into details of Nero’s principate,<sup>16</sup> was overall no detached reporter of the truth. Rather, he manipulated the common tradition for his own highly moralising ends, in particular to develop the *Octavia*’s theme of ‘corruption under tyranny’.<sup>17</sup> A confection of all his ‘dramatic skills’, Tacitus’ Nero is ‘a literary figure’, not ‘the object of dispassionate historical scrutiny’.<sup>18</sup> Suetonius and Dio, likewise, had their own authorial strategies. Suetonius has been described as a ‘rhetorician’, taking up stock themes of invective: Nero is an ugly man behaving in an ugly and depraved fashion.<sup>19</sup> Dio, writing under the autocratic Severans, is the harshest judge

<sup>12</sup> Henderson 1905, 421.    <sup>13</sup> Syme 1958, 437.    <sup>14</sup> Cf. Doody 2013, 295–6.

<sup>15</sup> Levi 1949, 7–40; Townend 1967, 96; Griffin 1984, 37–9, 235–8; Reitz 2006, 4–8; Hurley 2013, 29–310; above 7.

<sup>16</sup> Below 244.    <sup>17</sup> Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 3.55.2–6. Rubiés 1994, 35–6 (quotation).

<sup>18</sup> Rubiés 1994, 40 (quotation); Reitz 2006, 7: ‘Nero ist bei Tacitus also eine literarische Gestalt, nicht Gegenstand objektiver historischen Beobachtung’; cf. Bartsch 1994, 23–4.

<sup>19</sup> Barton 1994, 48 (quotation), 50–8.

of Nero, whom he regarded as their political ancestor.<sup>20</sup> As historians have increasingly appreciated the existence of the common tradition, they have attempted to identify and correct its distortions. It is now acknowledged that its denigration obscured a contemporary line of thinking, discernible even in our main sources, which proposed a 'good' or, at least, not wholly bad Nero.<sup>21</sup> Its validity is confirmed by the fact that Nero's memory did not suffer formal condemnation by the state; by the play that Otho and Vitellius made of his name; by the continued honouring of his tomb; and by the appearance of at least three 'false Neros'.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, he appears to have enjoyed remarkable, if sometimes misguided, continuing public affection. Dio Chrysostom, who flourished around 100, remarks in a way that brings to mind purported sightings of Elvis Presley, 'even now everyone wishes he were still alive. And the great majority do believe that he is'.<sup>23</sup> Modern scholars have pitched this alternative Nero against Nero the 'monster', but their efforts have had little effect on public imagination and, even on their own terms, have often been marred by an insidious tendency to see Roman history from an upper-class viewpoint, and so still to condemn Nero as the scourge of the Senate: testimony to the power of the 'senatorial tradition'.<sup>24</sup>

### 1.5 Reassessment

Rejection of the uncritical acceptance of Nero the 'tyrant' and 'monster' can be traced back to Gerolamo Cardano (1501–1576) in his *Encomium Neronis*.<sup>25</sup> However, like many before him, Cardano created his own 'Nero' for his own ends,<sup>26</sup> and it was more than three centuries before a considered assessment of the *princeps* was published in English.<sup>27</sup> Since then Nero has attracted significant attention. Some historians have remained content to follow the main source tradition's depiction of a man who became a monster, either more or less as it stands, as with Malitz

<sup>20</sup> Hurley 2013, 32.

<sup>21</sup> See Suet. *Ner.* 1.19.3, with Joseph. *AJ.* 20.154–6. Bradley 1978a, 66, 119; Champlin 2003, 24–5; Rathbone 2008, 252; Maier 2013, 386; Hurley 2013, 31–2.

<sup>22</sup> *Damnatio memoriae*: Champlin 2003, 29. Otho and Vitellius: Tac. *Hist.* 1.78, 2.95. Rudich 1993, 229–30. Tomb Suet. *Ner.* 57.1. Three false Neros: Tac. *Hist.* 2.8; Cass. Dio 64.9.3b–c; Suet. *Ner.* 57.3; Bradley 1978a, 294–5; Champlin 2003, 10–12; Grünwald 2004, 151–4; Barratt *et al.* 2016, 280 and n. 63. Otho and Vitellius: Tac. *Hist.* 1.78, 2.95. Rudich 1993, 229–30.

<sup>23</sup> Dio Chrys. *Or.* 21.10. Cf. Rubiés 1994, 40; Champlin 2003, 29–34; Waldherr 2005, 268–70.

<sup>24</sup> So Henderson 1905, 12–13; cf. below 18. <sup>25</sup> Rubiés 1994, 33; Reitz 2006, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Maier 2013, 396–7.

<sup>27</sup> Dawson 1964, 263; by G. H. Lewes in a *Cornhill Magazine* article of 1863.



and, in massive detail, Krüger, or with some mitigating explanation and justification of his actions, as with Waldherr and Shotter.<sup>28</sup> Others, however, have proposed a striking variety of interpretations, as can be seen from a short survey of specialist works published from 1900. Henderson's Nero is a good ruler but a bad man: an effective administrator but 'a helpless prisoner to his lower appetites'.<sup>29</sup> Levi's Nero is a flawed idealist.<sup>30</sup> His objective was the re-establishment of the Augustan Golden Age through an intensification of the Hellenisation of Roman cultural life and the extension of the monarchical powers of the *princeps*. He countered consequent upper-class hostility by turning to the people and the army, but his vices eventually destroyed his popularity and exposed him to senatorial attack. Grant's Nero is depraved and indolent, increasingly leaving the running of the Empire to others.<sup>31</sup> Cizek's Nero is, in contrast, an active ruler and an original thinker, set on instituting a new theocratic autocracy for a new world-state: 'Neronism'. 'Cultivated to the point of preciousness, vulgar to the point of brutality', he was destroyed by his flawed and unstable personality.<sup>32</sup> Griffin's Nero also actively directs imperial affairs and is also destroyed by his vicious personality. However, he is no great political reformer and fell victim to the 'unresolved contradictions' of the Augustan Principate, in which he was forced to operate and against which, urged on by unscrupulous intimates, he unsuccessfully rebelled.<sup>33</sup> Fini agrees with 'Nero his own man', but enthusiastically reinstates 'Nero the great reformer', albeit as a secularist, not a theocrat, with populist and internationalist leanings well ahead of his time. He failed because he was a narcissistic dreamer, but his vices have been exaggerated and his virtues discounted.<sup>34</sup> Holland offers a more negative duality. From 56, Nero took the reins of power and, aspiring to be a Hellenistic monarch and with some dreams of divinity, pursued policies aimed at securing the happiness and moral elevation of his people. However, psychologically damaged by an insecure childhood, he rejected traditional morality and was easily lured into excess by strong-willed associates. Champlin's Nero is 'a bad man and a bad ruler' but he is no devil. Rather, drifting into an ever closer exploration, self-explanation and reconstruction of himself as a great figure of myth and history, expressed in sporting and artistic performance, he simply neglected his duties as *princeps*.<sup>35</sup> A recent striking

<sup>28</sup> Malitz 1999; Waldherr 2005; Shotter 2008; Krüger 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Henderson 1905 (quotation: 423). <sup>30</sup> Levi 1949. <sup>31</sup> Grant 1970.

<sup>32</sup> Cizek 1982 ('raffiné jusqu'à la préciosité, plébeian jusqu'à la brutalité': 48).

<sup>33</sup> Griffin 1984 (quotation: 187–8); Griffin 2013, 479. <sup>34</sup> Fini 1994.

<sup>35</sup> Champlin 2003 (quotation: 52).

demonstration of Nero's endless mutability is provided by Shumate who, having sought a reasoned rebuttal of Nero the 'monster', was moved by her perception of gross irrationalities within the White House of George W. Bush to accept Tacitus' identification of these in the court of Nero.<sup>36</sup>

Starting from an interest in the office of Augustan *princeps* – 'the job of emperor' – and so in Nero as a ruler whose principate is sufficiently well-documented to provide a useful case study of the operation of the system, I expected to develop Griffin's reasoning: that Nero attempted but inevitably failed to run a system that was so raw that it was hardly yet a system at all – a monarchy that was not a monarchy, a 'half-baked Principate'.<sup>37</sup> However, consideration of political context led me closer to Grant and to Elsner and Masters' brief 're-writing' of his principate that envisages not 'an omnipotent boy-king who squanders his destiny' but 'a pawn in other people's political games' played in a powerful, self-interested and self-renewing imperial court. The notion of a Nero only 'superficially' in charge of his government has also recently been proposed by Meier and further developed by Kimmerle.<sup>38</sup> My Nero is a man who never controlled events.<sup>39</sup> He became emperor through the scheming of others. He did his best to act the difficult role of *princeps* but increasingly found the position not to his taste. He therefore disengaged from his responsibilities, threw himself into sport and art, and left the running of the Empire to others. Not wicked or depraved, indeed in some respects bourgeois in his values, Nero fell because when he chose to intervene in events his interventions were disruptive and because his refusal to accept the military duties of a *princeps* eventually broke the loyalty of his supporters.

### 1.6 Caveats

Before proceeding, one must ask whether any reinterpretation of the evidence can establish a more historically 'authentic' Nero. Rubiés, while arguing against 'traditional readings' of Nero the 'tyrant', notes the difficulties of separating truth from prejudice in Tacitus. Even to attempt this 'distorts the conventions and intentions of ancient historiography' which

<sup>36</sup> Shumate 2013, 349. <sup>37</sup> Drinkwater 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Elsner and Masters 1994, 3; cf. Kraus 1994: 'the contributors suggest a scenario ... in which imperial court factions control an essentially powerless *princeps* who is allowed to follow his desires only if they further the wishes of his keepers'; Meier 2008, esp. 573–4, 588 ('überflächlich'), 602; Kimmerle 2015, 109–10, 305. Cf. Romm 2014, xvii, 95 and Osgood 2011, 25–7 on the limitations of thematic and synchronic approaches in understanding individual emperors; also below 59.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. below 56.