

What Nero Says About Us

by Laurie Lefebvre

“Parricide”, “tyrant”, “monster”: it would be an understatement to say that the last Julio-Claudian emperor is not highly regarded. Making use of some impressive documents, Donatien Grau analyses the image of the hated emperor from the first century AD to the present day. The story of Nero reads like a history of the West.

Reviewed: Donatien Grau, *Néron en Occident. Une figure de l'histoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 2015, 416 pp., €32.

Retracing the evolution of one of the most intriguing figures of Western culture, connecting 2000 years of history, art and literature, following step by step the construction of a myth over which so much ink has been spilt that the ramifications are now innumerable and the subject is beyond anyone's control: such is the challenge taken up by Donatien Grau in deciphering the image of Nero from the first century AD to the present day.

His book – heroically, one might even say – realises a project that had been toyed with by a great many experts but hitherto remained a dream, and the accomplishment of such an undertaking certainly commands our respect. Not least because the author went through every detail with a fine-tooth comb: from literature to cinema, from antique coins to the frescoes of the Italian Renaissance, from Spinoza to the novelists of the 20th century. The body of documents he dissects is vast and examined with great precision.

A fourteen-year reign

In December AD 37, Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus was born, the future emperor Nero. He succeeded Claudius at the head of the Roman Empire in 54 AD, and died in 68 AD. Of these 14 years in power, posterity has retained – whether wrongly or rightly –

parricides, the burning of Rome, the first persecution of Christians, multiple debaucheries, incest, a passion for theatre and song – in other words all the ingredients of a good tyranny. Nero’s monstrosity is such that history seems to have gone beyond fiction, and historians have done their utmost to reconstruct the real story of the last Julio-Claudian emperor.¹

Nevertheless, it is not the history of Nero’s reign that interests Donatien Grau. Rather, it is his image, both the image he constructed for himself and that imposed on him; these are the components of what he calls “a historical and rhetorical construction” (p. 17), analysed from their origins in antiquity to the present day. In doing so, the author seeks to answer not “Who is Nero?” but rather “What is Nero?”; not “What do we know about him?” but “What does he say about us?”

The crystallisation of the myth

The author begins his investigation with the image portrayed, in Nero’s time, by aulic – that is, courtesan and partisan – literature and numismatics: a Nero who was at once a new Augustus, a new Apollo and an *optimus princeps* who would protect the world order and establish a new golden age. The sources consulted are numerous and varied; their analysis is precise and particularised – although the lack of illustrations and plates is regrettable, for they would have allowed the reader to visualise the numerous coins mentioned (pp. 51-60) and, later on, the paintings and frescoes described.

At the end of the Neronian era, the author identifies four stages in the development of the figure of the Julio-Claudian “monster”. First, in the aftermath of Nero’s death, came his rapid rise to the status of tyrant, and the crystallisation of his legend: “His own era created a mythical figure more than a historical one” (p. 104), with writers who were anxious to contradict everything that the court literature had painstakingly constructed.

For Nero quickly became a stereotypical tyrant. *Octavia*, the Roman *fabula praetexta* generally thought to date from the early Flavian period, already portrayed the emperor as an archetypal monster. Donatien Grau believes that the figure of Nero prevalent in ancient times stood “at the crossroads of two paths: that of power and that of tragedy” (p. 131). This should perhaps be qualified somewhat: the Nero of ancient literature is often – if not usually – a farcical character rather than a tragic one: one only needs to read the pages that authors such as Philostratus or Suetonius devote to the last Julio-Claudian emperor. The portrayal of the Neronian “weakness”, which Donatien Grau mentions in relation to the baroque dramatist Tristan l’Hermite (p. 253) in fact dates back to Tacitus.

¹ See in particular Edward Champlin’s *Nero*, published in 2003 by Belknap Press and republished in 2005.

The second stage is the Christian period, when the figure of the tyrant was portrayed with greater precision and detail. Promoted by the apologetic literature of the first centuries AD as the chief persecutor of the Christians, Nero became associated with the figure of the anti-Christ. Up until the end of the Middle Ages, Nero's story was given an almost exclusively religious interpretation, which was, however, in keeping with pagan condemnations of the character, which it perpetuated and renewed:

This Christian construction of Nero did not reject pagan traditions, but rather joined and transcended them. (p. 201)

A new configuration of the Neronian image

From the time of the Renaissance, thanks to the rediscovery of works by the Latin historian Tacitus, the Neronian myth entered a new phase. Writers revived ancient history and the pagan authors, presenting a secular, de-Christianised version of the tyrant and subjecting him to the political reflections of the time, which focused on the question of "better governance, the monarchy, its excesses and limitations, particularly with regard to the problem of tyranny" (p. 127). The figure of Nero made a return to its origins, becoming a source of anecdotes and examples intended to enlighten the reader.

However, Libertinism and, later, the Enlightenment were vigilant. Taking a critical view of the sacrosanct word of Tacitus and the clichés inherited from Antiquity, they undertook to redeem the character or, at least, endeavoured to portray him a more complex and nuanced way: in a spirit of revolution, they did not hesitate to challenge the common myth and give Nero a more positive image.

There is one final phase, which began with the Romantics. This is the stage in which Nero's character became disconnected from political speculation and religious considerations, shifting from the figure of a hated tyrant to that of an admired aesthete and the prefiguration of the sublime, iconoclastic and tortured artist; that is, in the field of research, an object of investigation and a field of practice for nascent philology and historical science. The mythical and rhetorical Nero of literature and art gave way to the "Nero of textbooks" (p. 337). Psychology and the cult of the ego also exerted an influence: increasingly, it was Nero's inner world – a more human Nero – that intrigued and fascinated people.

The epistemology of Nero

Donatien Grau's reflections are therefore part of this vast field of the history of ideas. Through and beyond the story of Nero, his essay opens a window onto Western culture, its fantasies, its preoccupations and the formation of its knowledge. The author decodes ancient imperial ideology; he unveils the beginnings of archaic Christian thought; he reveals the mysteries of medieval speculation, the functioning of humanist pedagogy, the rhetorical strategies of the Frontists and even the scruples of today's academics:

If we reconsider the different figures of the emperor from this perspective, we realise that he accompanies, almost without exception, the major Western movements: the rise of a theocracy in Rome, the crisis of Judaism, the emergence and institutionalisation of Christianity, the end of paganism, the loss of a part of pagan knowledge, the continuity of ancient knowledge even when that memory was lost, eschatological fear during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the return of antiquity within the framework of humanism, the emergence of the Reformation, the questioning of monarchical power, the establishment of the knowledge disciplines, free thought, the development of aesthetic feeling and of the figure of the artist, the scientific revolution, the totalitarianisms of the 20th century, nuclear terror, ending with the rise of the consumer society and the triumph of the subject who fantasises about his own inwardness and uniqueness. (p. 372-373)

Here we have a clear explanation of the fate of Nero's memory throughout the centuries and throughout the world: although a figure of the past, Nero's character is told in the present. For whenever authors approach the figure of Nero – be they historians or poets, researchers or painters, philosophers or filmmakers – they reveal as much about themselves and their own era as they do about the last Julio-Claudian emperor and his time. More than ever before, Nero's story reads like a history of the West.

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