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CAMWS

Nero Impersonators and Elvis Impersonators

1. Suetonius, *Nero* 57:

obiit tricensimo et secundo aetatis anno, die quo quondam Octaviam interemerat, tantumque gaudium publice praebuit, ut plebs pilleata tota urbe discurreret. et tamen non defuerunt qui per longum tempus vernis aestivisque floribus tumulum eius ornarent ac modo imagines praetextatas in rostris proferrent, modo edicta quasi viventis et brevi magno inimicorum malo reversuri. Quin etiam Vologaesus Parthorum rex missis ad senatum legatis de instauranda societate hoc etiam magno opere oravit, ut Neronis memoria coleretur. Denique cum post viginti annos adulescente me exstitisset condicionis incertae qui se Neronem esse iactaret, tam favorabile nomen eius apud Parthos fuit, ut vehementer adiutus et vix redditus sit.

He died in the thirty-second year of his age, on the anniversary of the murder of Octavia, and so great was the public rejoicing that the people ran around the whole city wearing liberty-caps. Yet there were some who for a long time decorated his tomb with spring and summer flowers, and now produced his statues wearing the toga praetexta on the rostra, and now his edicts, as if he were still alive and would return in a short time with great harm to his enemies. Moreover, Vologaesus, king of the Parthians, when he sent envoys to the senate in order to renew his alliance, earnestly begged this favor too, that the memory of Nero be honored. In fact, twenty years later, when I was a young man, a person of obscure origin appeared, who claimed that he was Nero, and the name was still so popular with the Parthians that they supported him vigorously and almost did not surrender him.

1. Tacitus, *Histories* 2.8-9:

8. sub idem tempus Achaia atque Asia falso exterritae velut Nero adventaret, vario super exitu eius rumore eoque pluribus vivere eum fingentibus credentibusque. ceterorum casus conatusque in contextu operis dicemus: tunc servu e Ponto sive, ut alii tradidere, libertinus ex Italia, citharae et cantus peritus, unde illi super similitudinem oris propior ad afallendum fides, adiunctis desertoribus, quos inopia vagos ingentibus promissis corruperat, mare ingreditur; ac vi tempestatum Cythnum insulam detrusus et militum quosdam ex Oriente commeantium adscivit vel abnuentis interfici iussit, et spoliatis negotiatoribus mancipiorum valentissimum quemque armavit. centurionemque Sisennam dextras, consordiae insignia, Syriaci exercitus nomine ad praetorianos ferentem variis artibus adgressus est, donec Sisenna clam relicta insula trepidus et vim metuens aufugeret. inde late terror: multi ad celebritatem nominis erecti rerum novarum cupidine et odio praesentium. gliscentem in dies famam fors discussit.

9. Galatiam ac Pamphyliam provincias Calpurnio Asprenati regendas Galba permiserat. Datae e classe Misenensi duae triremes ad prosequendum, cum quibus Cynthum insulam tenuit: nec defuere qui trierarchos nomine Neronis accirent. is in maestitiam compositus et fidem suorum quondam militum invocans, ut eum in Syria aut Aegypto sisterent orabat. trierarchi, nutantes seu dolo, adloquendos sibi milites et paratis omnium animis reversuros firmaverunt. sed Asprenati cuncta ex fide nuntiata, cuius cohortatione expugnata navis et interfectus quisquis ille erat. corpus, insigne oculis comaque et torvitate vultus, in Asiam atque inde Romam pervectum est.

At the same time Achaea and Asia were terrified by a false report that Nero was returning. The reports with regard to his death had been varied, and because of this many people imagined and believed that he was alive. The situation and attempts of the others [= Nero impostors] we shall tell in the course of our work; but at this time, a slave from Pontus or, as others have reported, a freedman from Italy, who was skilled in playing on the cithara and in singing, gained the readier belief in his deceit through these accomplishments and in the resemblance of his face to Nero. He recruited some deserters, poor tramps whom he had bribed by great promises, and put to sea. A violent storm drove him to the island of Cythnus, where he called to his standard some soldiers who were returning from the East on leave, or ordered them to be killed if they refused. Then he robbed the merchants, and armed the ablest-bodied of their slaves. A centurion, Sisenna, who was carrying clasped right hands (the symbol of friendship) to the praetorians in the name of the army in Syria, he approached with various artifices, until Sisenna in alarm and fearing violence secretly left the island and escaped. From there fear spread wide. Many came eagerly forward at the celebrity of the name, prompted by their desire for revolution and their hatred of the present situation. A chance shattered his fame, which was increasing every day.

Galba had entrusted the provinces of Galatia and Pamphylia to Calpurnius Asprenas. Two triremes from the fleet at Misenum had been given to him for an escort, with which Calpurnius reached the island of Cynthus; there were many who tried to win over the captains in Nero’s name. He, putting on a sad expression and calling on the loyalty of the soldiers, once his own, begged that they land him in Syria or Egypt. The captains, either hesitating or acting with craft, declared that they needed to address their soldiers and that they would return after they had prepared the minds of all. But they faithfully reported everything to Asprenas, at whose bidding they captured his ship and killed him, whoever he was. His body, which was remarkable for its eyes, hair, and grim face, was carried to Asia and from there to Rome.

1. Cassius Dio 66.19.3b-c:

ἐπὶ τούτου καὶ ὁ Ψευδονέρων ἐφάνη, ὃς Ἀσιανὸς ἦν, ἐκαλεῖτο δὲ Τερέντιος Μάξιμος, προσεοικὼς δὲ τῷ Νέρωνι καὶ τὸ εἶδος καὶ τὴν φωνήν καὶ γὰρ καὶ ἐκιθαρῴδεἰ. ἔκ τε τῆς Ἀσίας τινὰς προσεποιήσατο καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν Εὐφράτην προχωρῶν πολλῷ πλείους ἀνηρτήσατο, καὶ τέλος πρὸς Ἀρτάβανον τὸν τῶν Πάρθων κατέφυγεν ἀρχηγόν, ὃς καὶ δι᾽ ὀργῆς τὸν Τίτον ποιούμενος καὶ ἐδέξατο τοῦτον καὶ καταγαγεῖν εἰς Ῥώμην παρεσκευάζετο.

In his [Titus’] reign also the False Nero appeared, who was an Asiatic called Terentius Maximus. He resembled Nero both in appearance and in voice (for he too sang and played the cithara). He gained a few followers in Asia, and approaching the Euphrates attached a far greater number, and finally sought refuge with Artabanus, the Parthian leader, who, because of his anger against Titus, both received him and set about making preparations to restore him to Rome.

1. Dio Chrysostom 21.10:

οὐδέπω γὰρ καὶ νῦν τοῦτό γε δῆλόν ἐστιν· ἐπεὶ τῶν γε ἄλλων ἕνεκεν οὐδὲν ἐκώλυεν αὐτὸν βασιλεύειν τὸν ἅπαντα χρόνον, ὄν γε καὶ νῦν ἔτι πάντες ἐπιθυμοῦσι ζῆν. οἱ δὲ πλεῖστοι καὶ οἴονται, καίπερ τρόπον τινὰ οὐχ ἅπαξ αὐτοῦ τεθνηκότος, ἀλλὰ πολλάκις μετὰ τῶν σφόδρα οἰηθέντων αὐτὸν ζῆν.

For not at all even now is this clear; for so far as the rest of [Nero’s] subjects were concerned, nothing prevented him from ruling for all time, he whom even now everybody wishes were still alive. And the great majority do believe that he is, although in a certain sense he has died not once but often along with those who had been firmly convinced that he was still alive.

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